

MONTH April 1987

Reading von Balthasar

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Some comments on *'The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, edited by John Riches (T. & T. Clark, 1986), pp.238.

*'Tired of the old descriptions of the world,
The latest freed man rose at six and sat
On the edge of his bed. He said,
I suppose there is
A doctrine to this landscape . . .
(Wallace Stevens, 'The Latest Freed Man'.)*

THE EDITOR of this new volume of studies on the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, John Riches, confessed in the early 1970s to a sense of 'crusading zeal' in making known to an English-speaking readership the writings of the great Swiss theologian. The *Analogy of Beauty* is a partial fulfilment of his mission, since it is the first collection of studies by British and Irish theologians to attempt a coherent survey and exposition of von Balthasar's central themes and methods. It is all the more welcome in that it exhibits a properly ecumenical diversity in its presentation of this resolutely Catholic theologian who chooses to write within 'the Great Tradition' of Christian humanism, and who is uniquely able, in the contemporary world, to exhibit a mastery of the art of theological expression.

It is particularly appropriate that the Edinburgh publishers, T. & T. Clark, responsible for this volume and for the excellent translations of von Balthasar's *magnum opus*, *The Glory of the Lord*, which have been appearing in recent years, should also be the disseminators of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. A publishing house with a taste for massively comprehensive theological writing, from the Calvinist and Catholic traditions, is to be supported and applauded. (Would the Vatican's Award for Industry be an appropriate recognition?) The association between the two writers is significant if asymmetrical; Barth called von Balthasar 'our brother from another shore', and the debt of the younger Catholic to the magisterial Calvinist is apparent throughout his writings. Von Balthasar's book, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, which is an extensive and penetrating dialogue with Barth from a Catholic perspective, remains one of the most insightful analyses of Barth's theological approach. Noel O'Donoghue describes *The Glory of the Lord* as 'in some ways a rewriting of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*', and judges that 'a lot of the excitement of the book comes from the tension between the Barthian theology of discontinuity (and the total otherness of God in Christ) and that Platonic and Aristotelian



Hans Urs von Balthasar

strand in Catholic theology which sees nature as grace as somehow continuous, and so defends the basic goodness and beauty of human life'.¹

The reader who comes to von Balthasar from Barth will find himself in a different theological atmosphere. Barth's Biblical theology of proclamation is composed with an eye on the pulpit as the intended location of 'the repetition of God's promises' — Barth's definition of preaching. Von Balthasar, on the other hand, constructs a theological edifice which he compares to a 'Christian dome erected once and for all on the foundations of (classical) antiquity'.² He quotes Barth's mocking description of it as '*Santa Maria sopra Minerva*' — a mischievous, but accurate, phrase which highlights both the humanist culture which informs his work, and the centrality in his ecclesiology of the Marian dimension of the Church which, like a 'pro

ective mantle', encompasses the Petrine dimension and all its functions.

But already we are in danger of misinterpreting von Balthasar: his work is *not* a humanist rewriting of Barth, although it is true that Barth's influence is pervasive. Neither is he a Christian Platonist, although Plato and Plotinus are important presences at the key moments of his text. His work does not mark a return to a Patristic synthesis of Christian data and Greek philosophy, although it is true that he has found his way back, beyond Scholasticism, to a felicitous interpenetration of Christian themes and cultural breadth.

Neither should one judge that his theology is 'pre-critical', by-passing the philosophical challenge of the Enlightenment, which dominates the shape of so much contemporary theological investigation; it is rather that he refuses to take the agenda of the Enlightenment as the proper agenda for theological exposition. He has learned from Barth, whose reading of St Anselm enabled him to formulate a view of the autonomy of theological discourse, that theology has its own starting point, method and articulation, which derive from our taking seriously 'the *auctoritas Dei revelantis* in all its indissoluble concrete reality'.³ This gives him a freedom to retrieve a Patristic eloquence in which Biblical, cultural and philosophical dimensions find their place within the context of a richly symbolic theology. Noel O'Donoghue judges that von Balthasar's approach 'cannot be translated into terms of definition, distinction and demonstration, and it has the strengths and weaknesses that belong to this kind of approach'.⁴ In part, then, his appeal is that he presents a theology which has its own 'rightness' and internal coherence, which comes, I would suggest, from an Anselmian instinct for 'fittingness' as the principal logical sub-structure of theological expression.

An Ecclesiology of Symbols

Donald Mackinnon, who has contributed a characteristically penetrating essay to this volume, remarked that von Balthasar is a writer from whom he always *learns*. It is worth asking what his educative value for theologians might be, since, in many respects, he stands outside the fashionable lines of theological inquiry as a representative of a style of theological discourse whose roots are Origenist and Alexandrian, rather than Kantian and epistemological. His value is not simply in the breadth of erudition which he brings forward, although in his writings we are offered the riches of the intellectual, theological and spiritual traditions of Eastern and Western Christendom.

The question of his value can perhaps be illuminated by considering Hugo Rahner's judgment about the value of retrieving Patristic theological language in which symbol and imagery are allowed to function 'heuristically', as part of the disclosure of the divine mystery:

'Wherever the Fathers unfold their theology with its veils of imagery, we discover a wealth of symbols and of truths clothed in symbols, which would give new life to our modern dogmatic expressions, perhaps still all too much dominated as they are by apologetics and canon law. The world of imagery found in the symbols of the Church which the theology of the first ten centuries has preserved for us could bring about a renovation of our thinking about the Church, large areas of which have, from a dogmatic point of view, become sterile'.⁵

Rahner's comments are exemplified in von Balthasar's typological and symbolic ecclesiology in which the New Testament provides the 'archetypes' of 'privileged participation in Christ's all-sustaining experience of God':⁶ Mary (pre-eminently), Peter, Paul and John. If we turn to his treatment of Mary as an example of his symbolic exposition of the nature of the Church, it is because, for von Balthasar, Mary is the 'body-image' of ecclesial life, and is the responsive centre from whom ecclesial faith in Christ flows. Her 'virginal motherhood' is the model of the Bride-Church who is made fruitful by God's action:

'Mary's life must be regarded as the prototype of what the *ars Dei* can fashion from human material which puts up no resistance to him. It is feminine life which, in any case more than masculine life, awaits being shaped by the man, the bridegroom, Christ, and God. It is a virginal life which desires no other formative principle but God and the fruit which God gives it to bear, to give birth to, to nourish and to rear. It is at the same time a maternal and a bridal life whose power of surrender reaches from the physical to the highest level. In all this it is simply a life that lets God dispose of it as he will'.⁷

A modern reader, faced with this, will be aware of the weight of Biblical and patristic imagery which is being deployed, and yet, if she is tainted with the slightest degree of 'hermeneutical suspicion', she will also experience reservations about the perduring validity of this imagery for the contemporary Christian. There will be, for many interpreters, an inevitable, and, in my opinion, justified inhibition about accepting this language on its own terms. It is not clear to this reader that von Balthasar's 'virginal/bridal' imagery of the Church, developed with reference to Mary, has the power, in the modern age, to be the central heuristic symbol of the Church's self-interpretation.

In John Saward's comprehensive exposition of the relationship of Mary and Peter in von Balthasar's ecclesiology, there is an absence of critical judgment about the validity of the male/female polarity on which it is based and about the implications of von Balthasar's ecclesial symbols. There is, first of all, the presentation of an anthropological polarity between the *active male* and the *passive female*; this is developed soteriologically as a polarity between *Christ*

and the Church. Ecclesially, it gives rise to the polarity between the *male/active ecclesial office of teaching and order*, personified by Peter, and the *female/passive laity*, personified by Mary. A consequence of this, it seems to me, is that the Church is essentially female, 'serviced' by a necessarily male priesthood which instructs and fructifies. A lay woman might well object to the logic of this, and be unimpressed by von Balthasar's insistence that 'passive' means 'contemplative' and 'responsive to God' and therefore is more central and significant. Equally, a lay man might feel that there is no real place for him in this Church in which the laity are essentially female, and 'real men' are bishops and priests. In Christ 'there is neither male nor female' (Gal.3.28), yet von Balthasar's ecclesiology is constructed on precisely this distinction, and is developed with an insistence on the primacy of the female. From a very different perspective, he is in partial agreement with the feminist critique of the androcentric character of the Church, and has argued that a Church which has lost its female/contemplative/Marian centre is unbearably 'masculine' and distorted. The difference, however, is that von Balthasar sees the (proposed) entry of women into the hierarchial order as a betrayal of their centrality: instead of liberating women within the Church, such a move would damage 'the precedence of the feminine aspect of the Church over the masculine'.⁸ He even goes so far as to suggest that 'the Catholic Church is perhaps humanity's last bulwark of genuine appreciation of the difference between the sexes'.⁹

There is the suspicion that, underlying his exposition of ecclesial symbols, there is a massive projection of the 'anima' figure, and a consequent failure to control the elision of a debatable anthropological symbolic scheme into an ecclesial pattern. Brian McNeil suggests that von Balthasar's presentation of the essentially Marian Church leads to an 'undervaluing of the visible Church of hierarchy and sacraments'.¹⁰ The following quotation from von Balthasar's essay on 'Women Priests?' shows the absorbing power of the Marian principle from which all other ecclesial functions flow:

'The Church begins with the Yes of the Virgin of Nazareth . . . (The Twelve) receive masculine tasks of leadership and representation within the comprehensive feminine marian Church . . . What Peter will receive as 'infallibility' for his office of governing will be a partial share of the feminine marian Church'.¹¹

Theological symbols speak across the centuries, but they must also be *heard* anew by different generations; they will be heard, only if they articulate for the hearer what she recognises as an authentic expression of her implicit understanding as a human person and as a Christian believer. The reception of symbols is no less important than their retrieval and exposition. A parallel can be drawn between this view of symbolic reception and Wallace Stevens' lines in *Of Modern Poetry*, which present the poetic task as the creation

of a linguistic form in which is created 'The poet, the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice'. Words have to be found which enable the poet the reader to discover

' . . . sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot
descend,
Beyond which is has no will to rise'

Stevens presents the writer as having to construct a stage on which to address his audience, and

'With meditation, speak words that in the
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the so
Of which, an invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one'.¹²

There is an experienced sense of harmony between what is said and what we think *needs* to be said: a moment of satisfaction in which there is a correspondence between the poetic expression and our sense being illuminated in this way, and *only* in this way. For the reader, one of the tests of 'good' theology is his sense that a theologian has articulated the reading of faith in a way that enables him to recognise it and possess it. For the Church, this may be what we mean by the *sensus fidelium*: the rightness experienced when our faith is given expression in a way that illuminates the harmony of *lex orandi, lex credendi*.

Unfolding the Symbols

However, in spite of our reservations about the suppositions behind von Balthasar's ecclesial symbols which inhibit their reception, there is a powerful case for valuing the status von Balthasar attributes to symbolic and analogical thought. In his writings, analogical that root metaphor of Catholic sensibility, is pounded through symbols. The value of symbolic theology, whose absence is a serious weakness in Western Scholastic tradition, but powerfully re-vivified in his work, is well expressed in Robert Murray's reflections on the symbolic theology of the early Syriac Fathers of the Fourth Century, to which, in many ways, von Balthasar has found his way back:

'There is a moment of optimum equilibrium when, without violating the veils of divine mystery, religious symbols are intelligibly presented in such a way as to evoke a heuristic response leading to valid conviction and action — valid, even though the believer could not give a full rational account of what he understands. When that equilibrium is lost the way is open to iconoclasm, demythologization, rationalism — the other mental troubles more characteristic of the west than of the east'.¹³

This is eminently applicable to the strengths of von Balthasar's writings: symbols are allowed to function 'heuristically' as part of the disclosure of theological truth, and as central to theology's grasp of the divine

mystery. The 'equilibrium' which one finds in his best writings is, however, more than stylistic: it comes from his sense of the conjunction between the limits of what *can* be said and the requirement of what *must* be said. Von Balthasar offers a chapter on Dante in Volume 2 of *The Glory of the Lord*, and it seems to me that George Steiner's comments on the character of Dante's theological poetic language also illuminate von Balthasar's sensitivity to the necessary tension between apophatic and cataphatic theology:

'But it is decisively the fact that language does have its frontiers, that it borders on three other modes of statement — light, music, and silence — that it gives proof of a transcendent presence in the fabric of the world. It is just because we can go no further, because speech so marvelously fails us, that we experience the certitude of a divine meaning surpassing and enfolding ours. What lies beyond man's word is eloquent of God'.¹⁴

His value is in presenting a coherent, but internally varied, theological vision in which the great themes again find their place and can be expounded meditatively and cogently. Von Balthasar takes up positions which are masterly re-workings of ancient themes, and which are, at the same time, carefully reasoned challenges to contemporary uncertainties and presuppositions. All theology confronts a dilemma: its formal object of reflection, God, who is known in *the knowledge appropriate to faith*, cannot be encompassed within our categories, yet the form of his engagement with us must be interpreted and expressed. But how can God be interpreted without being misinterpreted and distorted in the process? *Si comprehendis, non est Deus*. The task is to develop interpretative patterns which are, in the first place, appropriate analogues for the divine mystery, and which, secondly, offer appropriate models of our engagement by God which are humanly intelligible and coherent, and which stand in continuity with the rest of our experience. If theology must allow God to be God in his mystery, without infringing on his incomprehensibility, then it must take equally seriously the fact that we are the active interpreters of that incomprehensibility.

It is in answer to this central question that von Balthasar has chosen to write a *theological aesthetics*, in which the perception of aesthetic truth is analogically related to the perception of divine truth in revelation. It is offered as a particular instance of the principle of the analogy of being, since 'beauty' is one of the transcendental attributes of being in Thomist metaphysics. Beauty is presented in a particular 'form', in which shines forth the 'splendour' or 'radiance' of created Being; analogically, the Incarnation of the Son is the assumption of a 'created form' — the humanity of Jesus — in which radiates the depth of divine love and glory which is the fullness of God's self-revelation. 'The figure which Jesus presents to the beholder is such that it can be 'read' as a figure at all only when what

appears of him is . . . what should we say here: 'seen as' or is it 'believed to be' the emergence of the personal (triune) depths of God'.¹⁵ The aesthetic analogy of 'form' and 'radiance' can then be developed in a Trinitarian theology in which the entire course of Jesus' life is an 'embodying' of the quality of kenotic divine love from which it proceeds: as the beautiful is intelligible only in terms of the reality whose splendour it focuses and expresses, so the person and life of Jesus is intelligible only as the expressive form which originates in the divine *ekstasis* of God's condescension. Von Balthasar quotes Barth: 'In this self-revelation, God's beauty embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we call "ugly" as well as what we call beautiful'.¹⁶

A Contemplative and Combative Theology

His theology, as we shall see, is contemplative and obedient to the pattern of divine revelation; it is also something of a 'partisan activity' (*kämpfende Theologie*), justified by the fact that 'the Word says and demands things of which men want to hear nothing, things that provoke opposition that goes as far as the will to annihilate'; nevertheless, 'this combative theology must not forget that it is to be accomplished in the name and the spirit of the Church, with the corresponding dignity, so that it may never descend to the level of worldly wrangling — the tone of doxology must always be able to be heard too'.¹⁷

In some of his strictures on the contemporary Church, however, there are deliberate barbs, and his notorious attack on Rahner in the 1960s over the notion of 'Anonymous Christians' could fairly be described as 'dignified, but disputatious, wrangling'. He is not afraid to lance a few theological boils while healing the patient. He describes his work as directed towards fostering 'a discourse *ad intra*, within the Church'.¹⁸ As a presupposition for, and not as an alternative to, the process of *aggiornamento*, there must be 'a reflection on the specifically Christian element itself, a purification, a deepening, a centring of its idea, which alone renders us capable of representing it, radiating it, translating it believably in the world'.¹⁹

Von Balthasar's choice of location for theological reflection contrasts with, for example, David Tracy's programme in *Blessed Rage for Order*, where it is multi-disciplinary, secularly involved, and lacks a clear role as an 'intra-ecclesial' activity. Von Balthasar writes theology *at the centre of the Church's experience*. For him, then, the discipline of theology primarily belongs within the praying Church, and only then, once it has established its own depth and centrality, can it enter the market-place and dialogue with other interpretive approaches. For von Balthasar, it is only if theology is grounded in an experiential sense of the mystery of God's engagement with us, and only if it is an expressive articulation of the depth of Christian experience, can it claim its place as a necessary

moment in the process of the Christian appropriation of God's love.

His theological programme gives rise to the following positions: he expounds a Trinitarian theology which he is not afraid to use, deliberately and consistently, as the *only* interpretative category which illuminates Jesus. He reads the Synoptic gospels in the light of the Fourth Gospel, not because he is unaware of exegetical diversity — indeed, he is a far more acute judge of the presuppositions which lie behind the handling of New Testament Christology than most — but because he regards a putative opposition between John and the Synoptics as a destructive fragmentation of the single witness of Scripture to the identity of the Incarnate Word. He has read Martin Kähler carefully, and is impatient with the popular distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. In his commentary on Pope John Paul's Letter to Priests on Holy Thursday 1979, he criticises 'the diluted, many times filtered image of Jesus which historical-critical exegesis today presents to the students of theology'.²⁰ Brian McNeil rightly says that for von Balthasar, 'the theological problems posed by the Gospels (e.g. the limitations of Jesus' knowledge: cf. Mk 13.32) are to be seen in the context of a kenotic christology that aims to do full justice both to the genuine humanity of the incarnate Son and to the claims of trinitarian theology'.²¹ (This signals, in my opinion, the assumption of what Lonergan calls 'a higher (theological) view-point', from which perspective it is possible to integrate data which, previously, were felt to be divergent and exclusive.)

Schillebeeckx's appeal for a revival of Synoptic Christological patterns holds little appeal for von Balthasar: one suspects that he would view the enterprise as a failure of nerve prompted by a sense of discomfort with what is required in Christian theology. In his eyes, the Church did not accidentally make its way to Nicaea and Chalcedon: these Christological milestones are not to be obscured with ivy while the theological traveller wanders back to start out again. Von Balthasar does not countenance a separation between exegesis, conceived as an autonomous enterprise, and theological and Christological reflection. Scripture belongs as the book of the Church's faith: 'all Scripture has a christological form, and by asserting itself powerfully into the history of the Church and of mankind Scripture gives shape to lives that bear the form of Christ'.²² He argues for a revival of the range of traditional 'senses of Scripture (allegory, tropology, anagogy)' and criticises 'today's philological theology (which) is chronically fearful of what it considers an 'extravagant whimsicality' of interpretation; it does not see what spiritual spaces the Scripture of the living Spirit opens up'.²³ Equally, his judgment on political theology is scarcely enthusiastic, and one suspects that this is as much a matter of personal sensibility as of theological judgment.

His conception of the role of theology is daunting: it is 'a meditative act of homage to the Lord of the Church, precisely to the extent that theology does not allow itself to be restricted to a merely practical function aimed at producing certain results . . . It gives account of what it has heard and understood. It is a statement of the greatest possible clarity in its essential distinctions as well as the greatest possible depth of intuition is for theology an end in itself, beyond practical intentions and obligations relating to the Church's proclamation; it is an act of adoration before Christ in the name of the Bride-Church'.²⁴ (I suspect that, written in 1961, this affirmation of the interiority of theology is an oblique rebuff to those who would see the role of the theologian as that of a 'functionary' of Church authorities. It also recalls the observation that speaking about 'practical theology' is as much of a contradiction in terms as speaking about 'military intelligence'.)

His comment that what we need these days are 'kneeling theologians' whose theological vision is nourished by prayer, is both correct and humbling: invariably, the best theologians are those who pray because in their text they exhibit the fruitfulness of prayer. Von Balthasar's choice of saintly writers favours those who exhibit an interiority and an archetypal grasp of the central issues. They come as culturally diverse as Dostoevski, Anselm, Dorothea of Thérèse of Lisieux, Hopkins and Péguy, but the people who have known, in an Ignatian way, that their own heart is the primary focus of the divine-human drama. (It seems to me a pity that the two essays in *The Analogy of Being*, which examine his interpretations of particular authors, should have chosen to study his reading of Goethe and Hölderlin, neither of whom are central 'conversation partners' for von Balthasar, and neither of whom can be said to be readily familiar to an English reader). Augustine and Pascal are, for him, the exemplars of the Catholic tradition of introspection, and he is indebted to Adrienne von Speyr, the mystic and writer with whom he founded a secular institute in Basel, for providing him with themes and insights from her experience which he integrates into his theological work.

Theology of Holy Saturday

His principal contribution to the tradition of Trinitarian theology, the 'theology of Holy Saturday' is dependent upon Adrienne's mystical experiences and marks a significant re-working of the Judaeo-Christian theme of the descent of the dead Son to Sheol. In the original myth, after his death Jesus descends to the underworld where Death and Satan hold captive the souls of the Old Testament; he bursts down the doors and binds Satan — for 'no one can plunder the house of the strong man unless he bind him first' — and leads Adam and Eve and their righteous descendants in triumphal procession to heaven. (This theme, served in the creed, is the basis of the Orthodox

of the resurrection, and of the Western medieval theme of 'the Harrowing of Hell'.) Von Balthasar develops this by portraying, again mythologically, the descent into Sheol as a descent, not into the 'dwelling of the just' who have died before him, but into the hell of those who, in the relative exercise of their freedom, have rejected God and 'damned' themselves. He enters in solidarity with their condition — a central soteriological image for von Balthasar — and 'disturbs their loneliness'. The logic of this is that God's salvation extends also to those who reject him: hell is not empty, as some have said, but even the condition of the damned is not outside the saving presence of the Son who has identified with their forsakenness. The damned can make their own the cry of the Psalmist, 'If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!' (Ps. 139:8).

Von Balthasar is not afraid to use this myth as a central, determinative theme which links soteriology and Trinitarian life. In common with Moltmann and Jüngel, he takes the Cross and Resurrection as central to his doctrine of God — indeed, he is the chief Catholic exponent of the contemporary revision of this Lutheran insight. Donald MacKinnon comments that 'the significance of Auschwitz for Balthasar on his knees on Good Friday should suffice to make plain that for him God's engagement with his world must reach in different ways the very substance of both alike, or else the very idea of it must be dismissed as 'sound and fury signifying nothing'.²⁵ Precisely so, and his handling of the implications of the ancient Christian myth of the descent into Sheol enables him to give profound expression to a Christian doctrine of God in which the inwardness of the Paschal Mystery is revelatory of the relations of the divine Persons in their engagement with the reality of human freedom.

Inevitably, these positions raise considerable difficulties for both soteriology and a coherent, and ontologically grounded, Trinitarian theology. Salvation, appropriated in freedom by the individual, has always been taken to require, as its obverse, the possibility of saying 'no' definitively to God. Von Balthasar wrestles with the compatibility of a serious affirmation of human freedom with the soteriological implications of this myth:

'One would still be able to say that God gives human beings the capacity to perform what seems for human beings to be a definitive (negative) choice against God, but which does not need to be judged/evaluated/assessed by God as definitive. And not in such a way that the human person's choice is called into question from outside — which would amount to a disregard of the freedom bestowed on it — but rather in such a way that God with his own divine choice, accompanies the human person into the most extreme situation of his (negative) choice. This is what happens in the passion of Jesus'.²⁶

It is notable that at the crucial moment of this text, von Balthasar replies on the image of God 'accom-

panying' the sinner in his choice. This image acts, throughout his writings, as a *Leitmotiv*, signalling depths of divine compassion which transcend human comprehension: it is pre-eminently an open-ended 'heuristic' symbol of divine condescension, which cannot be adequately paraphrased or transcribed in conceptual terms. In my judgment, he goes as far as possible towards affirming a universality of salvation in which the 'damned' are still not outside the all-embracing mercy of God. The myth also suggests, it seems, a 'hiatus' in the life of the Trinity, in which there is an alienation of the Son from the Father, and a moment of 'ontological' distance in which their loving union is severed by the Son's complete identification with the effects of sin. Here we are confronted with the tension between the compelling power of mythical thought and the relentless quest for an ontology of the divine being which can probe the same depths of meaning.

At his best, his theological statements exhibit a proportion between what is 'symbolically' or 'mythically' expressive, and what can coherently be said within the controls of theological restraint. However, there are moments when the authorial voice he chooses is melodramatic and over-strained, and when there is a disjunction between theological reserve and rhetorical exaggeration: in these moods, von Balthasar is strident and uncontrolled. Contrast, for example, two passages which describe the death and resurrection of Jesus as the focus of Trinitarian theology: the first takes up the theme of the mystery of the 'godforsakenness' experienced by the Son on the Cross, and develops it within strict linguistic boundaries. Throughout the passage, there is a re-working of the traditional *ontological* language of Trinitarian relations, and a Johannine emphasis on 'filial obedience', at the same time as the mission of the Son is presented, *mythically*, as a journey into the alien realm of sin:

'This opposition between God, the creative origin (the "Father"), and the man who, faithful to the mission of the origin, ventures on into ultimate perdition (the "Son"), this bond stretched to breaking point does not break because the same Spirit of absolute love (the "Spirit") informs both the one who sends and the one sent. God causes God to go into abandonment by God, while accompanying him on the way with his Spirit. The Son can go into the estrangement from God of hell, because he understands his way as an expression of his love for the Father and he can give to his love the character of obedience to such a degree that in it he experiences the complete godlessness of lost man'.²⁷

The second, taken from *The Heart of the World*, addresses Jesus on the Cross, and attempts to penetrate both his experience and the involvement of the Father in the death of his Son:

"'Father, I am your Son, your beloved Son, born from you before time began"! But the Father no

longer knows you. You have been eaten up by the leprosy of all creation: how should he still recognize your face? The Father has gone over to your enemies. Together they have plotted their war-plan against you. He has loved your murderers so much that he has betrayed you, his Only-begotten. He has given you up like a lost outpost; he has let go of you like a lost son. Are you sure that he really exists? Is there a God? If there were a God, . . . you would at least be allowed to kiss the hem of his garment when, in his sublimeness, he walked away over you, perhaps crushing you heedlessly underfoot. Oh, how gladly you would have allowed yourself to be trampled by that adored foot! But, instead of gazing into the pupil of God's eye, you stare into the void of a black eye-socket'.²⁸

This is far less acceptable: the imaginative dramatisation of Jesus' experience has lost its roots in classical Trinitarian theology: the Father is presented as a savage betrayer of his Son who has gone over to the side of his executioners. This violates the Johannine principles that the Father loves the Son, and *in loving him*, loves those with whom the Son has identified in his mission, and that between the Father and Son there is a perfect harmony of intention that the Crucifixion should occur for the glorification of the Father in the Son. (After reading this passage from *The Heart of the World*, listen to 'Es ist vollbracht' from Bach's St John Passion: the tired serenity expressed by Bach, which contrasts with the exaggeration of *The Heart of the World*, shows a profound feeling for the Johannine portrayal of Jesus' death.) It also transgresses the reticence in Mark's Gospel concerning the *inner* dimension of Jesus' experience: the cry, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' is left unanswered in the Gospel since this is the great mystery which we should not presume to penetrate imaginatively, because our answers can only be inadequate projections. It confronts us as a Buddhist *koan* and challenges explanation. To proceed as does von Balthasar here, is to project thoughts and feelings onto Jesus which, in my opinion, are unhealthy and unwarranted speculations. The justification offered by von Balthasar for doing this is supplied in his essay in *Word and Redemption*; it is a pity that Andrew Louth, who considers *The Heart of the World* as a foreshadowing of von Balthasar's later writings, does not advert to these reasons, since they are significant justification of his method and are highly controvertible.

Von Balthasar argues that, although we are given little Scriptural data about Jesus' inner experience on the Cross, we are entitled to transfer material drawn from the experiences of the saints and mystics and use them as his death. He argues that 'the prayer of the saints, their experience of God in the world' can be used to explore the relationship of Christ to the Father, because their 'dark nights' are a participation in the darkness of the Son's death:

'The inner experiences of the Redeemer passion, which should constitute the centre doctrine of redemption' . . . (can be illumined by 'the graces of participation in the passion given to the Church, the experiences of the saints which are quite inexplicable except as a participation in Christ's states . . . Why should we insist in ignoring the details of these sufferings, making not the least attempt to use, for a deeper understanding of the faith, these experiences which are so valuable for the Church?')²⁹

The saints, in their experience of darkness and desolation, share in the abandonment of Jesus on the Cross; consequently, the reticence of Scripture is amplified by using the psychological patterns of mystical visions and experiences. This seems to be a highly questionable procedure which permits the transfer of a whole range of data across a hermeneutical boundary which separates us from the historical Jesus: precisely the mistake of 19th Century Liberal Protestantism was to project its own moral and cultural horizon onto Jesus, without recognising that it was viewing, in Tyrrel's words, 'a Liberal Protestant face at the bottom of a dark well'. Von Balthasar seems to be permitting the transcription of medieval and contemporary mystical experiences across a similar disregard for the interpretative issues at stake. And yet, one can see the persuasiveness of von Balthasar's argument that the 'form' of ecclesial life and experience can be nothing less than a participation in the 'form' of the Son's faith and experience — and so, a reciprocity between the two is permitted. However, there is still the suspicion that the mystery of the Cross, far from being deepened by this method, can become the prey of sensibilities which obscure rather than illuminate the scandal of the death of the Son.

Conclusion

The Analogy of Beauty is intended by its editor to encourage discussion and to open up to an English speaking readership some of the themes and perspectives which are formative of Balthasar's theology. It succeeds in this task, and one can only applaud the initiative which inspired it. In this article we have had no more than touch on von Balthasar's themes and expressions — at times critically, but, I would hope, with a sense of deep appreciation for the complexity and achievement of his work. He offers to the contemporary Church a theology which has a unique capacity to generate insight into the central mysteries of Christian life, and which brings with it an unequalled depth of Christian and European culture. At times, one gets the impression that he is writing with an eye to a legacy to future generations, and that he is stating a justified claim to be one of the select group of theologians — Barth is another — with whom other writers will dialogue across the centuries. Such a perspective is valid, but it should not obscure his

for the contemporary Church. It is not unusual to find that von Balthasar has, for many people, deepened the quality of their 'understanding in faith' within the Catholic tradition, by the masterly way in which he writes within the context of his own personal faith. I am not sure that one has the right to ask for anything more. For what we have been given by him, we should be profoundly grateful. Let the editor have the last word: 'Perhaps in the end it is in this calling of theology back to its proper task of the unravelling of being, of the tracing out of the lineaments of the reality of the incarnate, crucified, descended and risen Lord that Balthasar's most valuable contribution will be seen to have been made'.³⁰

NOTES

1. *The Analogy of Beauty*, p.3 (hereafter: *Analogy*).
2. *Analogy*, p.211.
3. *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, I: Seeing the Form* (T. & T. Clark, 1982), p.154; (hereafter: *Glory*)
4. *Analogy*, p.8.
5. H. Rahner, *Symbole der Kirche* (Salzburg, 1964), p.8.
6. *Glory*, p.350.
7. *Glory*, p.564.
8. *New Elucidations* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p.194.
9. *New Elucidations*, p.195.
10. *Analogy*, p.137.
11. *New Elucidations*, p.192-3.
12. Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*, pp.239-40.
13. R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study of Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp.346-7.
14. G. Steiner, *Language and Silence* (Faber & Faber, 1967), pp.58-9.
15. *Glory*, p.153.
16. *Glory*, p.56.
17. quoted in *Analogy*, p.144.
18. *Analogy*, p.229.
19. *Analogy*, p.196.
20. quoted in *Analogy*, p.135.
21. *Analogy*, p.140.
22. *Glory*, p.547.
23. *Glory*, p.549.
24. *Glory*, pp.555-6.
25. *Analogy*, p.169.
26. *A Von Balthasar Reader*. (T. & T. Clark, 1982). pp.152-3. (This is a valuable and comprehensive selection of von Balthasar's writings).
27. *Elucidations* (SPCK, 1975), p.51.
28. quoted in *Analogy*, p.155.
29. *Word and Redemption* (Herder & Herder, 1965), pp.73-4.
30. *Analogy*, p.193.