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A Literary-Historical Reading of Hans Urs von Balthasar and His Sources

Rather than beginning this book with a biographical introduction to its protagonist, I deliberately commenced with a historical and theological overview of what is involved in articulating a Christian theology of literature.

Reading Balthasar as a Literary Critic

Having begun with the explication of the relationship between revelation and literature, I now move to the subject of this book, the literary criticism of Swiss Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–88). For those who are familiar with Balthasar's life, work, and influence, no biographical introduction is necessary. For those who are not familiar with Balthasar, helpful introductions to his work have been available in English for some time.[1] Regardless of

1. Balthasar himself was very self-conscious about the intellectual and religious trajectory of his thought throughout his long career, and five interpretive essays that he composed about his oeuvre at decade-long intervals have been collected in the volume *My Work: In Retrospect,* trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993). Overviews of Balthasar's theology can be found

how interpreters assess the validity of Balthasar's theological project, few informed critics could reasonably contest his influence on the development of Christian theologies of literature over the course of the past century. Examining Balthasar's literary criticism brings our opening theoretical exposition into the realm of concrete specificities, and putting flesh on a theology of literature allows the church to assess the stakes of such a theology more effectively. Perhaps the specific texts and the canon that Balthasar employs in his constructive project give theology unique benefits that cannot be duplicated by non-literary means. Contrariwise, perhaps Balthasar's employment of literary resources for systematic theology reveals weaknesses that should properly induce theologians to rethink the value of a marriage between theology and literature, if indeed their reciprocity is not as asymmetrically tilted in favor of theology as Balthasar claims.

This strategic approach to Balthasar means that throughout this book, I will not adjudicate ambiguities and disputes about what Balthasar's theological positions are simply by referring to orthodox Christian teachings or Catholic magisterial teachings *tout court*. I will not yield the entire debate over interpreting and judging Balthasar's writings to systematic and dogmatic theologians. That is ground that has been extensively covered by very capable scholars in recent decades. Instead, in the interest of traversing less traveled pathways in Balthasar scholarship, I will use a method that is more in keeping with Balthasar's own intellectual trajectory—namely, I will allow his literary criticism to set the terms of the historical and theological presentation, wherever that may lead. I will not try to tidy up ambiguities and discrepancies in his oeuvre, and it may be the case that Balthasar's literary interpretations are not a perfect fit for his theological conclusions, or that his stated objectives are belied by his rhetorical

in Edward T. Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Continuum, 1994); *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work,* ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991); *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar,* eds. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Aidan Nichols has written a three-volume introduction to Balthasar's trilogy. See Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide through Balthasar's Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998); *No Bloodless Myth: A Guide through Balthasar's Dramatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000); *Say It Is Pentecost: A Guide through Balthasar's Logic* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).

performance. Consider the tensions in the following recollection from Alois Haas:

> In private conversation, he occasionally liked to point out with some irony that he was really a professional scholar of German literature and not a theologian. The point of this self-definition was that theology was later to determine his scholarly and cultural writings both from within and from without. As a professional scholar of literature he was called and sent to become a theologian. A tension is thereby expressed which was to shape not only von Balthasar's theological work, but especially his work in German literature. . . . One can speak of a true theological *a priori* that impregnates all of von Balthasar's literary-philological works.
>
> Far from skewing von Balthasar's orientation as a literary critic, this theological *a priori* attests that he is a theologian with an interdisciplinary orientation.[2]

In Haas's account, we are presented with a literary scholar whose theology nevertheless determines his cultural critiques. Such a recollection mirrors the crucial distinction that Balthasar makes between "aesthetic theology" and "theological aesthetics" in the opening volume of *The Glory of the Lord*, in which the former category describes an approach that simply equates aesthetics and theology. Censuring this identification, Balthasar thinks that his theological aesthetics provides a superior alternative in which the theophany encountered in the person of Jesus Christ governs the appropriation of all other aesthetic forms in life and in literature.[3] If consistently applied, Haas's assessment and Balthasar's distinction would yield a tidy reconciliation of Balthasar's literary criticism and his theology.

Balthasar's recounting of his days as a doctoral student in the 1920s, however, provides a contrasting avenue of interpretive approach. Speaking to an audience at the Catholic University of America in 1980, he said, "I never earned a doctorate in theology. During my studies, the question that claimed my thoughts most was this: There are many good

2. Alois M. Haas, "Hans Urs von Balthasar's 'Apocalypse of the German Soul': At the Intersection of German Literature, Philosophy, and Theology," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar,* 45–46.
3. See Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics,* vol. 1, *Seeing the Form,* eds. Joseph Fessio and John Riches, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 79–116; Roland Chia, "Theological Aesthetics or Aesthetic Theology? Some Reflections on the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996): 45–127.

works of literature, music, and art, and of other spiritual or human activities. How can we recognize a masterwork that, though belonging to a particular category, transcends it and remains unique?"[4] Balthasar's remarks on this occasion proceed in accord with the philosophies of art explicated by the German Romantics, inasmuch as the value of a masterwork in Balthasar's recounting is its revelatory capacity, and the work of art can reveal transcendence (in Desmond's third sense of that word) in the same manner as a person can reveal divine transcendence to others, whether he or she is a priest, prophet, or saint. It is easy to understand how this approach to literature relativizes the objectivized and arbitrary distinctions among contemporary university disciplines and their discrete fields of study.[5] Balthasar's early methodology is best understood as a "way of discovery," or what theologians have called in Latin, the *ordo inventionis,* in which the searching of the human subject rather than the reified object serves as the unifying principle in describing the human encounter with the Absolute. Well before he joined the Jesuits in 1929 and embarked upon his theological career, Balthasar was searching for "masterworks."

As we will see in the later chapters of this book, this approach to literature will account for Balthasar's hostility toward social-scientific models of literary criticism that rose to prominence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially models that employed sociology and psychology. Nineteenth-century writers such as Hippolyte Taine and Karl Marx, for example, push social-scientific criticism to a historicist extreme, with the former's *Histoire de la Littérature Anglaise* ushering in the eclipse of transcendental concerns in French intellectual circles during the period of the late nineteenth century. For methodological, philosophical, and theological reasons, Balthasar

4. Balthasar, Theology and Aesthetic," *Communio* 8/1 (1981): 62–71, at 62.
5. For more about the differences between Balthasar's interpretive style and that of Anglo-American hermeneutics, see Edward Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 73–77. Oakes's comments about the nebulous boundaries between philosophical, theological, and literary works in *Germanistik* holds good for the original context in which Balthasar studied, but this current book will focus upon texts in the last of these three categories.

severely censures social-scientific criticism for its truncated field of concern, its refusal to address literature as, using Balthasar's words, "something like a sacrament."[6] Elsewhere, he argued for a balanced hermeneutical approach using more religious language: "Great works of art appear like inexplicable miracles and spontaneous irruptions on the stage of history. Sociologists are as unable to calculate the precise day of their origin as they are to explain in retrospect why they appeared when they did. Of course, works of art are subject to certain preconditions without which they cannot come into being; such conditions may be effective stimuli but do not provide a full explanation of the work itself."[7]

Taking my cue from Balthasar's admission that social and historical contexts help to shape the masterworks of literature, my primary goal in this book is to explicate and evaluate from a historical perspective the "certain preconditions" that govern the quasi-sacramental and somewhat miraculous masterworks that captivated Balthasar from his early years.[8] In the course of a chronologically organized survey of twelve selected Christian writers contained in the second and third volumes of his published theological aesthetics, Balthasar did offer more detail about the developments that brought the need for a literary approach to religious transcendence to the fore. While the second volume of *The Glory of the Lord,* subtitled *Clerical Styles,* examines theologians proper, the succeeding volume, *Lay Styles,* begins its historical survey after the end of the thirteenth century, an era after which most leading figures in Christian spirituality in Balthasar's

6. Balthasar, "Tragedy and Christian Faith," in *Spiritus Creator,* vol. 3 in *Explorations in Theology,* trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 397. For an exposition of Balthasar's evaluation of the social sciences, see James K. Voiss, "Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Use of Social Sciences in Ecclesial Reflection: Exposition, Analysis, and Critique," in *Theology and the Social Sciences,* ed. Michael H. Barnes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).
7. Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger, *Two Say Why: 'Why I Am Still a Christian,' and 'Why I Am Still in the Church,* trans. John Griffiths (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1973), 20.
8. Those who are interested in a evaluation of Balthasar's literary criticism in which genre provides the organizing principle should read the incisive book by Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History,* Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Quash criticizes Balthasar for employing an epic frame of reference that does not fully achieve the dramatic theological hermeneutic that Balthasar intends, despite the latter's stated intentions. Along the same lines, see Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 45–58, for a similar contrast between narrative and dramatic styles.

judgment were not "official theologians," but laity who found themselves estranged from the clergy. Dante, Hopkins, and Péguy are included in this survey of alienated Christians, and Balthasar writes of these three and the other representatives of the lay style in theological aesthetics:

> That the great upholders of Christian intellectuality . . . not seldom feel themselves to be, and behave like, representatives of the ecclesiastical 'opposition' and have to take upon themselves the corresponding fate of the exiled, the misunderstood, the outlawed is not astonishing; rather, it manifests, in the main, a burning concern for the most genuine concern of the Church and of theology—Dante! Pascal! Péguy!—which they see as being inadequately defended by the run-of-the-mill clergy.[9]

I would not push Balthasar's organizing principle here so far as to suggest that the rise of this ecclesiastical opposition from the late medieval period onward is a constitutive precondition for the development of his literary approach to theology, but neither can this sharp distinction between clergy and laity and the accompanying rise to prominence of vernacular literatures be unduly minimized. A quarter-century before *Lay Styles* was published, the first volume of Balthasar's *Apocalypse der Deutschen Seele* began its historical survey of German idealism, which Balthasar later called "a secularized theology," by tracing the "loss of eschatological unity" that Reformation and Renaissance humanism visited upon a supposed medieval theological synthesis balancing God and world, transcendence and immanence.[10] The narrative of historical decline from a high-medieval theological synthesis is a staple of Roman Catholic surveys of Christian history, and is familiar to those versed in Catholic historiography and apologetics. Not only does Balthasar's distinction between official theology and

9. Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord,* vol. 2, *Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles,* ed. John Riches, trans. Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh, and Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1984), 15.

10. See Balthasar, *Apokalypse der Deutschen Seele: Studien zu einer Lehre von Letzten Haltungen,* vol. 1, *Der Deutsche Idealismus* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1998); after its initial publication in 1937, this book was published by F. H. Kerle in 1947 under the title *Prometheus;* see also *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age,* vol. 5 of *Glory of the Lord,* eds. Brian McNeil and John Riches, trans. Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeil, John Saward, and Rowan Williams (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 339–407; *Tragedy under Grace: Reinhold Schneider on the Experience of the West,* trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 93.

"literary theology" provide additional justification for the autonomy that I will accord Balthasar's literary criticism in respect to his theology, but in Balthasar's retelling, these characterizations of decline and opposition that serve as preconditions for post-medieval European masterworks generate dichotomous relationships between divine revelation and the creative secular intellect. Using a musical analogy that is appropriate, given Balthasar's lifelong passion for classical music, we can state that even before his examinations of individual authors and texts have commenced in these surveys, Balthasar has already suffused his literary interpretations with a *cantus firmus* of religious and cultural disintegration.[11] German scholarship had, of course, no shortage of declinist historical narratives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* and Spengler's *The Decline of the West* providing the key exemplars of the genre. Does Balthasar offer a Catholic variant of the same?

In order to set this problematic between literature and revelation into clearer focus, I have used a chronological approach to present the most influential works of literature upon which Balthasar comments, grouping them under the three headings—"Pre-Christendom," "Christendom," and "Post-Christendom." Each of these broad historical periods confronts Christian theology with unique problems as the church attempts to discern what religious masterworks can be discovered in the ebb and flow of time. From its very beginning, the community of disciples debated the meaning of God's covenant with Israel in light of its belief in Christ's resurrection, but Balthasar's readings of ancient Greek literature come very near to endowing that corpus with the status of a second "Old Testament." We will see how Balthasar interprets the pre-Christendom literatures of ancient Greece and Rome as a tragic attempt to anticipate a complete integration of reality in which the division between the gods and humanity is

11. Balthasar's first book, *Die Entfaltung der musikalischen Idee: Versuch eine Synthese der Musik* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1998), was published in 1925. His cousin Peter Henrici wrote that Balthasar knew all of Mozart's works by heart. See Peter Henrici, "A Sketch of Von Balthasar's Life," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work,* ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 8–9.

overcome. The failure of pre-Christian pagan literature shines out more tragically in comparison to the biblically inflected world of Christendom, in which the Bible sets the literary norm for the confrontation and subsequent reconciliation between God and humanity, but the gospels also encapsulate the supercessionist discontinuity between pagan and Christian literature that calls the value of the former into question. Moreover, the Bible's preeminent status as divine revelation risks leading imaginative literature into a cul-de-sac in which literature's value is confined to that of a commentary upon scripture. Balthasar rejected this truncated view of literature in the post-Christian age, and his appraisal of Renaissance and Baroque drama exalts Shakespeare and Calderón for their vivid depictions of the distance between God and human persons. Those who have only a passing familiarity with the secularization theses of twentieth-century sociologists of religion can easily guess what Balthasar's estimation of the high-modernist strains of the literature in post-Christendom will be, based upon his insistence to preserve a tragic distance between the human and the divine. Scavenging through the ruins of a post-Christian age, Balthasar digs up modern writers whose works preserve strains of the Christian spirit, but without the social and political supports of the bygone era of Christendom. While some of the writers that Balthasar examines—such as Dostoevsky—have been granted canonical status in the annals of Western literature, the marginal status of others raises the issue of the extent to which medieval Christendom's cultural support provided the "necessary preconditions" that made the literary-cum-theological masterworks Balthasar appreciates possible.

Dominant Modern Literary Influences on Balthasar: An Overview

Giving a brief orientation to some of the most important authors and literary movements in Balthasar's post-Enlightenment pantheon will provide a helpful foreshadowing for my following evaluation of his reading of Western literary history. The writers I note here are ones who influenced Balthasar but did not always earn his esteem, or if

these writers earned Balthasar's literary commendation, they did not always receive his theological approbation. Consider this tart excerpt from the fifth volume of *The Glory of the Lord,* in which Balthasar contrasts Schiller's unfinished *The Knights of Malta* with Schiller's completed and staged plays:

> Yet it is not *The Knights of Malta* drama which was performed, but *Wallenstein,* and then the series of dramas in which formalism penetrates the artistic element like mildew. The *Mary Stuart* is good though coldly calculated theater; the *Maid of Orléans* borders on kitsch, the *Bride of Messina* is hollow and unconvincing; *William Tell* is shallow despite all its pure inspiration and *Demetrius* is only another variant on the *Maid* (like the planned *Perkin Warbeck*): that is to say, only man united within himself can act "divinely."[12]

Despite this critical trashing, Schiller and fellow German Romantic contemporaries cast a long shadow on Balthasar during the 1920s and 1930s, as readers could expect, given Balthasar's receipt of a doctorate in German literature. To say that Romantic writers such as Goethe, Schiller, and Novalis only interest Balthasar, however, would greatly understate their influence on him. In a 1976 interview Balthasar, identifying himself as a "Germanist," identified Goethe as the writer whose use of *Gestalt* in the context of describing plants provided Balthasar with his basic orientation as a theologian.[13] In this interview, Balthasar's primary intention is to contrast Goethe's natural philosophy with an abstract Kantian transcendentalism, but the Goethean inheritance also saturates Balthasar's literary criticism, with Faust serving as the post-Christian analogue to Aeschylus's Prometheus. Goethe's Prometheus rebels against the Olympian gods

12. See Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord,* vol. 5, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age,* eds. Brian McNeil and John Riches, trans. Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeil, John Saward, and Rowan Williams (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 546. In 1955, Balthasar confessed that "the Schiller of the *Maltheser* kept me from closing the dossier on the aesthetic Idealists." See Balthasar, *My Work,* 41.
13. See "Geist und Feuer: Ein Gespräch mit Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Herder Korrespondenz* 30 (1976): 72–82, at 76; Ulrich Simon, "Balthasar on Goethe," in *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,* ed. John Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 60–76. Balthasar also edited three anthologies of Goethe's works: *Goethe, Nänie: Auswahl aus Seinen Trauengesängen* (Basel: B. Schwabe, 1942); *Goethe, Bilder der Landschaft: Auswahl aus Seinen Landschaftsgedichten* (Basel: B. Schwabe, 1942); *Goethe: Ein Füllhorn von Blüten* (Basel: B. Schwabe, 1951).

and creates his own world, complete with a human race. From the first volume of Balthasar's *Apocalypse der Deutschen Seele,* which appeared in 1937, to the survey of modern metaphysics included in *The Glory of the Lord* and published in the mid-1960s, Balthasar continued to employ the character of Faust as a postlapsarian archetype of humanity unconstrained by a theological horizon. If Faustus represents, for Balthasar, the failure of the scholar to achieve the total perspective upon the universe, Goethe's Wilhelm Meister novels perform a similar deconstruction for the ambitions of literature and drama, as the protagonist comes to doubt the efficacy of his "theatrical vocation." Balthasar identifies a similar split in Schiller's poems and dramas, contrasting Schiller's Promethean figures such as Franz Moor and Wallenstein with obedient subjects such as Karl Moor, Maria Stuart, and Jeanne d'Arc. These contrasts are not between good and bad people, as Balthasar finds fault with the latter group just as much as with the former. In Balthasar's telling, those characters in Schiller's most popular dramas who submit to a higher political and ethical law do so for fundamentally selfish reasons, motivated by a Kantian ideal of the dutiful self, rather than by loving "interpersonal, truly committed obedience."[14]

In assessing the merits of Novalis's writings, Balthasar trains his focus primarily on Novalis's view of childhood. Given the often-sentimental view of childhood that has accrued in Western popular culture over recent decades, readers may well scratch their heads when Balthasar judges Novalis's presentation of children as Promethean in nature. How could a child mimic the all-too-adult Doctor Faustus? Yet Balthasar decrees that Novalis's novel *Henry of Ofterdingen,* an *Erziehungsroman* in the style of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* books, treads close to the early identity philosophy sketched by Johann Fichte in the 1790s.[15] Novalis's idealized child is not the babe coming to consciousness through its mother's smile—to use a metaphor that Balthasar borrowed from his friend, the German philosopher Gustav

14. See Balthasar, *Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age,* 542–46.
15. See Balthasar, *Der Deutsche Idealismus,* 255–92.

Siewerth (1903–63)—but a spirit possessed of the quasi-magical ability to appreciate life as a undifferentiated synthesis between self and world, a child who needs no other person to attain its human vocation.[16] In *Apocalypse der Deutschen Seele,* Novalis is paired with his contemporary Friedrich Hölderlin against the backdrop of the human lifecycle, with the former's writing judged to explicate "the kingdom of the child" while the latter's work is introduced under the heading "the kingdom of the youth." In Balthasar's recounting, the protagonist of Hölderlin's epistolary novel of education *Hyperion* is more pessimistic than Novalis's Henry in his estimation of the human person's ability to achieve an undifferentiated state of static consciousness. Hölderlin's later unfinished tragedy *The Death of Empedocles* proffers suicide as a solution to the problem of the unhappy individual's inability to achieve communion with the universe. Balthasar may have loved the aesthetics of the *Goethezeit,* but throughout his career, he was sensitive to what he identified as its theological dangers and its tendency—at times latent and at times overt—toward pantheism.

The opposition between these German Romantics and Fyodor Dostoevsky is summarized in a remark that Balthasar made in his introduction to volume six of *The Glory of the Lord,* in which Balthasar contrasted ancient Greece with the later Christian era. Balthasar wrote:

> The provisionality of myth must allow itself to be judged by the finality of the Gospel, so that in its finality the world of myth may attain to its rightful rank and expressive value. . . . When later on the "sphere of metaphysics" becomes Christian, the problem of the "discernment of spirits" continually emerges—of discernment between the penultimate ("philosophical" or "poetic") standard of judgment and the definitive biblical criterion. . . . To us it seems that the real tragedy of intellectual history, from the Middle Ages to modern times, has lain in the secret struggle over this ultimate criterion.[17]

16. See Gustav Siewerth, *Der Metaphysik der Kindheit* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1957).
17. Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord,* vol. 6, *Theology: The Old Covenant,* ed. John Riches, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis and Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 23.

Whereas Goethe and Hölderlin were identified in the previous volume of *The Glory of the Lord* as writers seeking to retrieve classicism for the modern age, and Schiller as an adherent of "Metaphysics of the Spirit," Dostoevsky's novels are introduced under the prosaic heading "Folly and Glory."[18] Balthasar's use of Dostoevsky as a foil for the nineteenth-century German soul dates back to 1939, when the second volume of *Apocalypse der Deutschen Seele,* titled *Im Zeichen Nietzsches,* was published. In the final half of that volume, Balthasar explicates an idiosyncratic historical trajectory in which the Promethean strivings of German Romantic idealism give birth to the Nietzschean *Übermensch,* a villainous degradation of the Kantian moral exemplar who is constrained neither by a categorical imperative nor by a heteronomic law.[19] Against this historical background, Dostoevsky's characters such as Alyosha and Prince Myshkin confront evil without the benefit of intellectual sophistication or social supports. The post-Christian world of the late nineteenth-century has forced upon the protagonists of *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot* an existential choice that appears absurd from the point of view of standard religious apologetics. Why should the Christ figure kiss the inquisitorial Superman in Ivan Karamazov's parable, and why does Myshkin allow himself to be used by the likes of Nastasya Filippovna? No answer to these questions appears acceptable, and fittingly enough, when Balthasar returns to examine Dostoevsky twenty-five years later in *The Glory of the Lord,* the novelist's writings are organized under the subheading "The Christian as Idiot," with *The Idiot* characterized as a book in which "the folly motif reaches its climax in a work that surpasses all previous forms."[20]

The transition from proud Faustus to humble Myshkin over the course of Balthasar's survey of nineteenth-century literature did not foreshadow Balthasar's embrace of the twentieth-century bourgeois novel, and Nicholas Boyle excoriates Balthasar's disdain for the realistic novel in Boyle's indictment of the "snobbery of the Germanist-

18. See *Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age,* 141–204, 298–408, 513–46.
19. See Balthasar, *Apocalypse der Deutschen Seele,* vol. 2, *Im Zeichen Nietzsches* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1998), 202–419.
20. See *Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age,* 188–201, at 189.

turned-clergyman."[21] Balthasar's 1953 monograph on German writer Reinhold Schneider (1903–58) details the work of a Catholic convert whose historical novels and plays look to the medieval and early modern aristocratic past.[22] Even here, however, with novels whose archaic subject matter is far removed from the beaten paths of high modernism, Balthasar is exonerated from any charge of simplistic nostalgia for the era of Christendom, and his interest in Schneider's oeuvre centers upon that writer's conviction that the exercise of royal power is necessarily tragic. Balthasar draws the following lesson from Schneider's 1950 play *Der Grosse Verzicht* (*The Great Refusal),* in which the hapless Pope Celestine V is used as the political pawn of Charles II of Naples and Boniface VIII: "The Christian kingly power is always tragic for Schneider and demands renunciation as its counterweight, and all ecclesiastical 'power' of the hierarchical office is always founded on the powerlessness of the Cross and of the crucified Peter."[23] Christians of a politically conservative bent in the age of post-Christendom may be horrified at the thought that Prince Myshkin now represents the ideal of faithful discipleship amidst a hostile and religiously uncomprehending world, but Schneider and Balthasar work to disabuse their readers that pining for a supposed golden age will lessen the inevitable confrontation between Christians and their modern secular cultures.

Schneider's major works are suffused with royal conflicts and ecclesiastical intrigues, and Balthasar's organization of this monograph on Schneider follows a nationalist pattern (e.g., "Portugal—The Dream," "England—The Guilt," "Germany—Penance). The foreword to his next monograph, however, entitled *Gelebte Kirche:*

21. Nicholas Boyle, "'Art,' Literature, Theology: Learning from Germany," in *Higher Learning and Catholic Traditions,* ed. Robert E. Sullivan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 87–112, at 107.
22. See Balthasar, *Tragedy under Grace*. The title of the German original was *Reinhold Schneider: Sein Weg und Sein Werk* (Cologne: Hegner, 1953).
23. Balthasar, "Reinhold Schneider and the Tragic Christian," in *Spiritus Creator,* vol. 3, *Explorations in Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 471–96, at 481. Further evidence for Schneider's fundamentally tragic assessment of monarchy *in se* can be found in his *Die Hohenzollern: Tragik und Königtum* (1933). Schneider's 1932 biography, *Fichte: Der Weg die Nation* (Munich: Albert Langen/Georg Müller, 1932) provides a thematic link to the German Romantics introduced in this current section.

Bernanos (The Lived Church: Bernanos), sets political unity and creative power in opposition to each other. After bemoaning the decline of Catholic literature from its blossoming in the early twentieth century under French writers such as Léon Bloy, Charles Péguy, Paul Claudel, and Georges Bernanos, Balthasar makes the curious assertion: "Despite its nationalism, the nineteenth century created a truly universal literature through the power of its language, while this creative power has been debilitated, ironically, in the present age of Europe's emerging unity."[24] Nineteenth-century Europe may have already lost the religious unity of Christendom, but at least its literature had a centripetal force. The late twentieth century can only aspire to such an ersatz achievement, and so the novels examined in *Gelebte Kirche*'s retreat from the royal courts of Schneider's works and their characters are socially marginalized, even though Bernanos, like Schneider, drew personal inspiration from the bygone era of Jeanne d'Arc's medieval France, as seen in Bernanos's essay *Jeanne Relapse et Sainte* of 1929. Bernanos in Balthasar's retelling is a sacramental novelist, one whose "novels are expositions of a lived theology of the sacraments," and yet, there is no ecclesial triumphalism in his writing, but rather, like Schneider, Bernanos has "the same tragic pathos of the knowledge of what is transitory."[25]

What makes Bernanos's characters tragic rather than simply pathetic figures whose suffering carries no significance beyond their individual fates? This question must be faced directly, for in the Balthasarian theological framework, the dramatis personae in any work of imaginative literature must transcend a solipsistic exhibition to achieve religious import. John Milbank, shrewdly placing Bernanos in a French literary trajectory emanating from Bloy and Péguy, identifies a point of central importance, writing, "At its most extreme this tradition has asked whether it is possible to risk one's own

24. Balthasar, *Bernanos: An Ecclesial Existence,* 3rd ed., trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), 17. Leiva-Merikakis removes this quotation from the text and relegates it to a footnote, remarking that it would be "somewhat out of place within the body of an English version of this book."
25. Balthasar, *My Work,* 35, 40.

damnation for the sake of others, although this is rightly diagnosed as the most subtle of all the devil's wiles by Bernanos in the utterly terrifying *Sous le Soleil de Satan.* If this novel disturbed Maritain, its verdict is nonetheless an authentically Augustinian and Thomistic one, as against certain decadent pietistic extremities."[26] "For Bernanos," Balthasar claims, "Christ is the very foundation of man's psychic life. . . . Bernanos' psychology refers us first and last to his Christology."[27] Here, of course, is the definitive distinction between Balthasar's narrative of spiritual decline and those of Nietzsche and Spengler. Balthasar's interest in marginalized protagonists does not stem from traditionalist ressentiment, political nostalgia, or religious elitism.[28] Balthasar's elevation of characters such as Chantal in *Joy* and the curé in *The Diary of a Country Priest* is rooted in his conviction that the Son of God is not only a suffering servant, but a misunderstood, socially alienated, and ignored one as well. In the era between and after the World Wars, modern European democracies sought political unity as penance for the horrors that they had committed, but their efforts in Balthasar's telling are based in a centrifugal religious amnesia that marginalizes the Christ figure. Explained in this manner, standing with the Christ figures in this particular strain of twentieth-century European literature is less a refusal to embrace "the whole human family in its total environment," to use the words of the Second Vatican Council's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today,* than it is an act of religious solidarity.[29] Critics rightly emphasize Balthasar's part in the *ressourcement* efforts of the French *nouvelle théologie* movement and his retrieval of patristic sources. In moving outside the genre of exegesis, Balthasar's literary criticism serves to

26. John Milbank, "Scholasticism, Modernism, and Modernity," *Modern Theology* 22/4 (Oct. 2006): 651–71, at 663.
27. Balthasar, *Bernanos,* 193.
28. For an interpretation of Balthasar's theological differences with Karl Rahner along these lines, see Herbert Vorgrimler, *Understanding Karl Rahner: An Introduction to His Life and Thought,* trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1986), 123–25.
29. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), §2 in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils,* ed. Norman P. Tanner, vol. 2, *Trent—Vatican* II (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 1069.

remind us that the most important goal of his program was not historical accuracy, but the faithful discipleship to a rejected Messiah.

Louis Dupré, evaluating *The Glory of the Lord* over twenty-five years ago, judged that readers of Balthasar's theological aesthetics would feel "distant from the currents that are moving the theology and even the spiritual life of our contemporaries. The Olympian detachment of an aesthetic construction which isolates the reader from his own life world risks estranging precisely those who feel most impressed by it."[30] To the extent that much of the Christian Church in the economically privileged world embraced a Whiggish theology of progress in the late twentieth century, Dupré's verdict is understandable, especially to Anglo-American audiences. Bernanos's country priest, for example, writes in his diary: "I, too, often find myself thinking about the Russians. My friends in the seminary used to argue about them without really knowing, I think. Mostly to rile the professors. Our democratic colleagues are very pleasant and full of zeal, but I find them just a little—how shall I put it?—a little *bourgeois.*"[31] The curé's friend Torcy warns him about the social alternatives proposed by the Russians: "Theirs isn't such a fool's plan. Get rid of the poor—that's always been the idea, since the poor man bears witness for Jesus Christ, the heir of Jewry, isn't that it?—but instead of making him a beast of burden or wiping him off the face of the earth, they've got the notion of turning him into a small *rentier* or even—supposing things should really go ahead—into a low-grade government official. Quite the easiest thing to manage, the most orderly and submissive!"[32] What Dupré calls "Olympian detachment," for Balthasar, represents the true distance between the poor man of Nazareth, his imitators, and the world of technocratic aspiration.

The monarchical sympathies of Schneider and Bernanos did not mean that Balthasar judged their work to be fatalist or blithely

30. Louis Dupré, "Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theology of Aesthetic Form," *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 318.
31. Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest,* trans. Pamela Morris (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2002), 51.
32. Ibid., 50–51.

unconcerned about the communal properties of Christian salvation—an assessment that becomes clearer in examining the poet whom he identifies as their spiritual progenitor. When Balthasar selected his pantheon of twelve models of "theological style" in *The Glory of the Lord,* both Schneider and Bernanos were passed over, as Balthasar chose Charles Péguy as the sole representative from the twentieth century. In *Gelebte Kirche,* Balthasar called Bernanos and Péguy "wrathful Christians," and linked Dostoevsky, Péguy, and Bernanos as three writers testing "the social problematic of damnation."[33] As I will argue later in chapter seven, the damnation that Bernanos is concerned with is not otherworldly in the manner of Dante's *Inferno.* Dostoevsky adapts the account of Christ's temptation in the desert in his tale of the Grand Inquisitor, but the devil of Ivan Karamazov's story takes on a life of its own and returns later in *The Brothers Karamazov*, not amidst the fires of hell, but in the guise of an all-too-imminent midnight visitor. In three long poems Péguy wrote on the eve of World War I, Jeanne d'Arc and her companion Madame Gervaise give voice to Péguy's dissatisfaction with traditional Christian doctrines of eternal damnation. Péguy's rejection of these teachings was based not upon moral outrage over eternal punishment, but on his conviction that traditional eschatological doctrines promoted bourgeois individualism and social apathy in the face of present human suffering. For his part, Bernanos took an early interest in the encounter between the devil and humanity. His first novel, *Sous le Soleil de Satan* features an appearance by Satan in the guise of a horse trader, and Bernanos argued in a 1927 address that the experience of damnation was not limited to the afterlife. Hell is internalized in his account: "All people for millennia have had, if not a clear consciousness, at the very least a presentiment, of hell—of its traps, its mirages—in a word, of the Sun of Satan!"[34] In *The Diary of a Country Priest,* Bernanos's country curé challenges the countess's penal and eschatological definition of hell

33. Ibid., 341, 443.
34. Bernanos, "Satan et Nous," in *Essais et Écrits de Combat,* vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 1101.

with his own existential one: "Hell is not to love any more, madame! Not to love any more."[35]

The young priest's claim that hell is to love "*ne plus*" implies that damnation is to lose a gift for compassion that one previously had, which leads to a contrast between the children of Bernanos and Péguy, on the one hand, and the wonder children of Novalis and Hölderlin, on the other. Those German Idealists promote self-contained young people, while Péguy's poem *The Mystery of the Second Virtue* opens with a depiction of hope as a young girl walking alongside her two sisters—faith and charity.[36] In *The Diary of a Country Priest,* the curé de Torcy, in the midst of one of his wise rants, informs the country priest: "Childhood and old age should be the two greatest trials of mankind. But that very sense of powerlessness is the mainspring of a child's joy. He just leaves it all to his mother, you see." To Torcy's thinking, childhood is not merely a stage in the lifecycle, but an ecclesial vocation: "The shabbiest tuppeny doll will rejoice a baby's heart for half the year, but your mature gentleman'll go yawning his head off at a five-hundred franc gadget. And why? Because he has lost the soul of childhood. Well, God has entrusted the Church to keep that soul alive, to safeguard our candour and freshness."[37]

Bernanos himself, however, had no sentimental illusions about childhood, and his late play *Dialogues of the Carmelites* shows us the terrors of a young religious novice who takes the name "Sister Blanche of the Agony of Christ." At this point in his work, the Christian vocation of childhood becomes sacramental in imitation of the suffering Christ, and any illusions about children being sheltered from the world's evils are crushed in this adaptation of Gertrud von le Fort's novel about sixteen Carmelite victims of the Reign of Terror in 1794.[38] Young Sister Constance argues with terror-stricken Blanche about the possibility of

35. Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest,* 163.
36. See Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope,* trans. David L. Schindler, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 11.
37. Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest,* 20.
38. See Balthasar, *Bernanos,* 498: "The whole drama represents, not a torture, but an ineffable liberation. It purifies like a sacrament"; Gertrud von le Fort, *The Song at the Scaffold,* trans. Olga Marx (Kirkwood, MO: Catholic Authors, 1954).

vicarious atonement through martyrdom.[39] Balthasar interprets this aspect of *Dialogues* with the psychological overtones that look back to the Carmelite saint John of the Cross's poem *The Dark Night of the Soul,* and simultaneously, look forward to his later treatment of Christ's death and descent to hell. He writes:

> Bernanos' whole trend of thought regarding death moved out of the danger zone of a higher self-mirroring and transcendental reflection and became immersed in the mystery of Christ's death and agony. Henceforth, the thought of human death remained unfathomable outside the reality of Christ's own dying. . . . This agony, however, is no longer that of man abandoned to his own helplessness but that of participation in the darkness of the Cross—a participation that is most real, albeit unconscious, for the one undergoing death in the night of impotency. In the end, each person dies another's death because Christ has died the death of each of us for us.[40]

Balthasar's Literary Prolegomenon to Christianity

What themes emerge from this first pass through Balthasar's literary canon? We need to move beyond the obvious ones—namely, that the literary productions of those German Idealists and Romantics who influenced Balthasar are, on the surface, less amenable to theological appropriation by Christian theology than those composed by believers such as Dostoevsky Bernanos, and Péguy. Instead, in keeping with the methodological principle announced above, Balthasar's literary evaluations provide him with three specific tools that he will use to sculpt his distinctive theology: a) the category of the tragic as a theological tool; b) instances of social alienation endowed with redemptive import; and c) an insistence on the collective solidarity of saints and sinners.

To understand Balthasar's use of tragedy, we can begin by attending to a statement by Rodney Howsare, who, in a study of Balthasar's relationship to Protestant thought, described Balthasar's preferred

39. See Bernanos, "Dialogues of the Carmelites," trans. Michael Legat, in *The Heroic Face of Innocence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 68–70.
40. Balthasar, *Bernanos,* 467. See Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter,* trans. Aidan Nichols (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993).

theological resources as those that demonstrated "a combination of catholicity and Christocentrism."[41] Balthasar's love of literature and his Catholic orthodoxy represent the two addends in this combination. German Romanticism and its elevation of the tragic as a preeminent literary genre provided Balthasar with an instance in which the *curvatus a se* of human sinfulness could be represented in literary forms. In the Western theological tradition stemming from Augustine, evil has been interpreted as a privation of the good, a *privatio boni,* a surd without essence, a specter that when seen in its truest reality can only appear as . . . nothing. While this metaphysical system attains a high degree of internal consistency in trained hands, its ontological approach debilitates any aesthetic depiction of the conflict between good and evil, since no appeal to the visible is consistently admissible. By employing Promethean villains such as Goethe's Faust and Schiller's Wallenstein as the antagonists in what Balthasar describes as an apocalyptic struggle for the German soul, he formulates a catholicizing strategy that strives to circumscribe rebellion within Christ's saving mission. Sometimes, this aesthetic and apocalyptic tactic always hovers upon the razor's edge of theological dualism, as a superficial appraisal of the tragic as a theological category can lead to the judgment that the villain and the savior mutually condition each other in the drama of salvation. After all, who are the heroic equals to Faustus and Wallenstein in Goethe's and Schiller's plays?

Schelling defined tragedy as "a real dispute between the freedom in the subject and objective necessity."[42] When these dramatic terms are translated into a theological mold, the relationship between literature and theology is not explicated in terms of fulfillment or perfection, as one might find in earlier writers such as Basil of Caesarea and Erasmus. Instead, a discontinuous heuristic of judgment comes to the fore. Curiously enough, Balthasar's modern literary canon does not try to mimic the motif of apocalyptic justice set out in the Book of Revelation.

41. Rodney Howsare, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and Protestantism: The Ecumenical Implications of His Theological Style* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 105.
42. Friedrich Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art,* trans. Douglas W. Stott, vol. 58, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 251.