

# Faithful Performances

Enacting Christian Tradition

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## Introduction

# Art, Performance and the Practice of Christian Faith

Trevor A. Hart

“He that bigan in you a good work, schal performe til into the day of Jhesu Christ”

Engagement between Christian theology and art has a long history. In practical terms, the relationship between Christian faith and artistry stretches back to the earliest decades of Christian history, and the subsequent history of art in the Western tradition is one in which the presence of the Christian church (its beliefs, its practices, its patronage) dominates the horizon for better or worse. Over the centuries, serious intellectual integration of the understanding of faith and of artistic practices and outputs was often occasioned by very concrete concerns about the use and possible abuse of art works within specific religious places and practices. One thinks, for example, of the fierce deliberations which raged over the use of icons in eighth century Byzantium, of medieval discussions about the liturgical mediation of ‘spiritual’ presence under the ‘corporal’ forms of painting and statuary (directly concomitant, of course, with the emergence of a ‘high’ doctrine of the Eucharist), and of the sharp reaction of some of the Reformers to all this, resulting in deep-rooted iconoclastic attitudes from which some strands of Protestantism have never quite recovered.

While such disputes produced highly sophisticated responses and categories, some of which remain helpful in our approach to central questions that are still relevant today, they were nonetheless by nature largely reactive and lop-sided in their attention, and hardly amounted to a carefully considered theology of human artistry. In the modern era, with the consolidation of a particular notion of ‘the arts’,<sup>1</sup> the attempt has been made to situate the various human practices and products falling under this rubric more positively within a metaphysics of some sort, and, more often than not, one of identifiably Christian provenance or influence. Historians of ‘fine art’ have, for their part, traced the vital ‘iconological’ links between artistic styles and outputs and the wider currents of ‘religious’ sensibility which informed and were duly shaped by them. Philosophers and theologians have, in their turn, sought

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1 On this see, e.g., Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 163-227; also Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Carlisle, Solway, 1997).

to understand artistic creativity as such as a human phenomenon, and to relate it to things believed about God, the world, and what it means to be a creature. From the theological side, too, there has been increasing recognition that critical attention to certain art forms might furnish important intellectual resources for constructive theological work itself. This has been apparent, for example, in the attention afforded to the study of literature, sometimes as a fresh and illuminating way of approaching the Christian tradition's own literary sources in Scripture, and sometimes as a locus of vital concrete engagement with questions and concerns about human existence with which theology itself has to reckon and to which it must respond. More recently, there has been a marked rediscovery of the 'theological' contribution of much western painting across the centuries, not least among biblical scholars, who now regularly engage with examples of a mode of 'visual exegesis' which they perceive in painted depictions of biblical stories and themes. Such attention is being granted now not in order to serve the related interests of art-historians, but those of professional interpreters of the biblical text.

Literature (especially poetry) and the visual and plastic arts have typically enjoyed the most central and exalted places in modern conceptions of 'the fine arts', and it is perhaps to be expected that they should occupy similar privilege and priority in theological engagements with the arts more widely. Thus, even when other artistic forms (music for example, or drama) have occasionally been reckoned with, they have too often been treated as essentially analogous to poetry and painting, being addressed and analysed at the level of their existence as inert 'texts'. But these forms (and others, such as opera and dance) cannot adequately be treated in such a two-dimensional manner. The 'works' proper to them do not properly exist at all apart from some *performance* in which the relevant 'text' is brought to fulfilment or completion through embodied action, and to exclude this dimension is to overlook all that is most distinctive to their art. Performance, in other words, is not secondary to these forms of artistic engagement with the world, but essential to their artistry. It is therefore very welcome that, in recent decades, there has been a growing theological interest in music and drama precisely as performing arts, and in the performative dimensions of them in particular. This has occurred as theology has sought models to help it understand better aspects of Christian faith's own peculiar situation with respect to a text, a text which must be 'brought to completion' through forms of embodied action in which it is 'interpreted' faithfully for a world (and not just a world) which looks on as it does so.

The metaphor of artistic performance (especially its theatrical versions) has seemingly enjoyed some place in the religious modelling of life in God's world since ancient times. Whatever one may make of those anthropological theories which would trace the roots of theatre itself in religious ritual of one sort or another,<sup>2</sup> the existence of links between the two spheres is apparent enough, stretching back identifiably at least as far as classical appeals (in first century Stoicism for instance)

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<sup>2</sup> See on this, e.g., Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2003), 1-25.

to the image of the ‘world-stage’, and perhaps much farther than that. The various elements of the model make such a link natural enough, not least for Christian faith and theology, although the history of the Church’s relationship to the theatre has rarely been a happy one over the centuries, which may account for the relatively late appropriation and deliberate development of the image by Christian theologians.<sup>3</sup> As well as the relationship between a script/score which must not just be ‘read’ but rather ‘played out’ on a stage, before an audience, in ways which may constitute a more or less ‘faithful’ interpretation of it, there are other equally fruitful metaphorical entailments<sup>4</sup> having to do, for example, with matters of *character*, dramatic *parts* which must be played out, which are both *scripted* (allocated a certain given unity or pattern) by a playwright, and yet must be *performed responsibly* and with a certain skilled *creative spontaneity*, parts which perhaps entail the *assumption* by the actor of a *persona* or set of dispositions other than that which is his or her ‘natural’ one. There are issues, too, about different *traditions* of performance, about the sort of *training* which a skilled performance may require and how this acquired, about the *communities* within which certain works are habitually played out and the place of those works in shaping and defining those communities as such, about what might constitute an *authentic performance* of a work (or an inauthentic one), about how the actor’s own character may be modified or transformed by repeated playing of a particular role, and so on. At the very least, perhaps, the metaphor of artistic performance is suggestive in theological terms because of the fundamental religious conviction that human life is indeed lived (a work ‘played out’) not just in the sight or hearing of other people, but before a God who (however else he may be held to be involved in things) looks on and listens with great interest, and makes judgments about what he sees and hears. This conviction grants all life lived in terms of it a ‘performative’ aspect from beginning to end. Our true character, it has been said, is what and who we are when we think that no one is watching! But, strictly speaking, for faith there is no such moment. Life is lived in its completeness under the watchful gaze of God, a fact which may instill either fear or confidence, depending on what ‘character’ God himself is duly held to have.

It is not theology alone, we should note, that has appropriated artistic performance as a fruitful way of modelling human life. In fact, fifty years or more ago, strands in emergent sociology and social psychology were beginning to appeal directly to elements of dramaturgy in particular, duly borrowing such dramaturgical notions as ‘Self’, ‘Transformation’, ‘Role Taking’ and ‘Role Distance’ to model human life as a ‘social reality’.<sup>5</sup> The ‘sociology of knowledge’ and other elements among the social

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3 Some of the wider links between religion and performative aspects of drama and music are explored helpfully in Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (eds), *Performance and authenticity in the arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

4 For the helpful notion of the ‘entailments’ attaching to the use of particular metaphors within image schemata see Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 130-137.

5 For a convenient anthology see Dennis Brissett and Charles Edgley (eds), *Life as Theater; a Dramaturgical Sourcebook* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1975). The

sciences have since explored the possibilities further, lending to ‘performance’ and its attendant categories (‘tradition’, ‘script/text’, ‘communities of interpretation’, relevant ‘skills’ of performance, ‘defining practices’, etc.) the status of conceptual tools in terms of which one may usefully approach human behaviours of various sorts, so that ‘performance’ has in effect become, in the words of one recent study, ‘a paradigm for the investigation of culture at large’.<sup>6</sup> With the advent of so-called ‘post-modernity’ all this has been fused with a specific epistemological agenda, the idea of artistic performance (especially ‘improvised’ performances) as something radically particular, essentially open-ended (there can be no final or definitive performance of a work, as and when a ‘work’ can be identified at all) and indeterminate (and thus inherently ambiguous, resisting claims to absolute closure), appeals naturally to the more Heraclitean streak in post-modern sensibility. Indeed, at its starkest, the post-modern appropriation of performance as a paradigm for our engagements with ‘reality’ insists – after the manner (though not necessarily the spirit) of J. L. Austin’s linguistic analysis of various sorts of ‘performative utterance’ in human discourse – that the meaning of and warrant for even ‘scientific’ knowledge gained through research and experiment, is not to be had by supposing (wrongly) that it produces an accurate or adequate model of the world. Rather, what is sought here, as Fredrick Jameson notes, is “a non- or post-referential epistemology” for which truth is a function of performance itself (putting the ‘story’ or ‘text’ into play through continuous fresh action) rather than being measured in terms of the alleged correspondence between some ‘text’ and a state of affairs lying ‘beyond’ or ‘outside’ it.<sup>7</sup> Closure is endlessly deferred. The legitimization of ‘knowledge’, like the meaning of a performed work, must be realized anew every moment rather than a matter of ‘deference’ in the face of some absolutely authoritative product of the epistemic past.

With such deliberate broadening of the remit of performance-related talk, it has been suggested, the term has now entered our language as one that shifts easily and quickly between different “areas of meaning”. We advertise ‘high-performance’ vehicles, measure ‘performance’ in the workplace and mete out ‘performance-related’ pay, watch the financial pages to see how stocks and shares are currently ‘performing’, and urge our small children not to ‘make a performance’ in public when we will not buy or give them exactly what they want.<sup>8</sup> Yet, in so far as this wider set of social uses of the term is indeed identifiable as an appropriation of artistic models, there is an interesting irony to be observed. For the roots of ‘performance’ as a (relatively modern) artistic concept are themselves sunk deep

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earliest piece incorporated in this volume was first published in 1949. others were first published between 1955 and 1973.

6 Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis, *Drama/Theatre/Performance* (London: Routledge, 2004), 1.

7 In his ‘Foreword’ to Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, translated from the French by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), ix. On the link between post-modernity and ‘performance’ more broadly, see Shepherd and Wallis.

8 So, e.g., Shepherd and Wallace, *Drama/Theatre/Performance*, 1.

in the soils of more ancient, socially diverse uses, *par-* or *performer* ('to carry through in due form'?) being linked to the etymologically prior *parfourmir* ('to accomplish entirely, achieve, complete'). Thus at the end of the fourteenth century Wyclif (1382) translates Philippians 1:6 as "He that bigan in you a good work, schal performe til into the day of Jhesu Christ"; while Chaucer (1386) marks the mundane passage of time with the poetic "Parfourned hath the sonne his Ark diurne".<sup>9</sup> So, while they did not have to cope with needlessly powerful four-wheel-drive vehicles on their roads or share the preoccupation of our age with constant monitoring and measuring of whatever in life can be monitored and measured, earlier generations certainly already knew 'performance' as a socially mobile term, applicable to God's redemptive activity, to the movements of the sun around the earth, and, of course, much else besides. The particular development of 'performance' talk within the discourses of the arts has, through the mechanisms and strategies of re-appropriation referred to above, duly *returned* it to society with interest added. The accrual has by now been significant, and the past several decades have witnessed the sedimentation of a discrete academic discipline and associated literature, 'performance studies', dedicated specifically to exploring the performative dimensions of music and drama, and their relationship to wider patterns of human practice.<sup>10</sup> The language itself has, we might say, 'performed' well in semantic terms!

Specifically theological borrowing of 'performance' talk from the arts is also largely a phenomenon of the past twenty years or so. The metaphor was proposed first by writers concerned with the nature of biblical interpretation, a discipline that had become somewhat hide-bound by the dominance of historical-critical models which, by their emphasis on the antiquity and essential 'strangeness' of the biblical text, tended to exalt (or relegate) it to the status of a valuable artefact, but thereby easily lost sight of its role as a living Word to the Church. Interestingly, it was not New Testament scholars proper who first advocated the model, but systematic theologians and patristic scholars, whose own work was necessarily concerned with Scripture as possessed of contemporary as well as historical significance, and with the ways in which, over the centuries, it has been 'played out' variously within the living traditions of the Church.<sup>11</sup> The metaphor of Scripture as 'script' or 'score' has, though, duly been taken up by practitioners within New Testament studies

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9 Both cited in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, second edn., prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, Vol. XI (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), art. 'Perform', 543. The *New Revised Standard Version* renders the relevant portion of Phil. 1:6 as: "the one who began a good work among you will *bring it to completion* by the day of Jesus Christ" (my italics).

10 See, e.g. John Rink, *The Practice of Performance: Studies in Musical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Cf Richard Schechner *Performance Theory* (London: Routledge, 2003). *Text and Performance Quarterly*. (London: Routledge).

11 See, for example, Nicholas Lash's essay 'Performing the Scriptures' in Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1986), Frances Young, *The Art of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990).

itself as a fruitful corrective and counterbalance to other mainstream approaches.<sup>12</sup> Its metaphorical entailments re-establish a close link between the reading (or ‘interpretation’) of the biblical texts and wider patterns of action within the life of the Christian community. These are texts, it insists, whose meaning may only be had as something is done with them and on the basis of them, and that something involves much more than what we typically do in libraries and lecture theatres. They are texts which, like dramatic scripts or musical scores, must be interpreted through forms of public performance, played out in the life of Church and society, and in ways which are concerned not simply with faithfulness to the shape of some ‘original’ or ‘authentic’ mode of performance (where that is capable of recovery), but also with the particularities of the ever-changing circumstances within which performance must be attempted. What constitutes a ‘faithful’ performance will, therefore, be judged in accordance with a more complex set of criteria, drawing on the accumulated wisdom of earlier generations of performers and the examples furnished by particular ‘classic’ performances (‘tradition’<sup>13</sup>), as well as relying upon the spontaneous creativity of the moment in which through the actors’ ‘skill’, and in engagement with the particular audience, the scripted word once again ‘takes flesh’ (‘inspiration’).

Where the Church’s approach to the Bible as Scripture is concerned, it is not just forms of human action that are under consideration, of course, but God’s action too. The God whose character is narrated in the biblical texts is precisely a God who acts and who is known in – and not apart from – his acts. Furthermore, the appeal to Scripture itself as a living Word of God to us is predicated not just on a past activity of God lying on the far side of some supposed ‘big ugly ditch’ of history. It rests on the conviction that the same God whose activity is depicted supremely in the Old and New Testaments nonetheless continues to be active, a player together with us, as it were, in the ever fresh performance of this same text; or, if we prefer to take our theatrical image in a slightly different direction, the one together with whom we are now engaged in improvising the final ‘lost’ act of a drama whose first several acts (and hence the key characters and as yet incomplete plot) are thoroughly familiar to us.<sup>14</sup>

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12 A helpful engagement with Lash and Young, and other early examples among New Testament scholars is provided by Stephen C. Barton, ‘New Testament Interpretation as Performance’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 52/2 (1999), 179-208.

13 The term ‘tradition’ in this context, it should be noted, pertains to a broad set of human phenomena and practices through which the Gospel is transmitted and actualized in the church. Understood thus, as Richard Bauckham notes, “Tradition .. consists not only of creeds, council decrees and the teaching of bishops, but of liturgy, hymns, popular spirituality, art, poetry, stories, preaching, forms of pastoral and missionary activity, academic and popular theology, charitable and educational institutions and so on” (Bauckham, ‘Tradition in relation to Scripture and Reason’ in Benjamin Drewery and Richard Bauckham (eds), *Scripture, Tradition and Reason: A Study in the Criteria of Christian Doctrine*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd, 1988), 131.

14 This image is developed suggestively by N. T. Wright in *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 140ff.

Of course it is equally important for certain purposes to insist upon the otherness of God, and his transcendence of history and creatureliness as such, and to this end we may prefer to picture him as one ‘offstage’, in whose presence or before whom we are called to perform our part in the drama. But unless we would lapse into a wholly unbiblical form of deism, we cannot limit God to the front row of the balcony, even if, in doing so we dignify him with the role of playwright in the house. Even the image of God as Director of the performance, while fruitful in many ways, must not be allowed to compromise this other claim, that God is also a character in the drama we are called to perform or to improvise. In the incarnation, of course, he takes flesh and becomes an actor on the stage together with us; but while his involvement in the action is certainly concentrated here it is not limited to this particular part. More widely, the perception of Christian faith is, as one recent study has it, that “If Christian faith is from start to finish a performance” it is so precisely because “our God is a performing God who has invited us to join in the performance that is God’s life”.<sup>15</sup> Such theological emphases have seen theatrical metaphor taken up and explored deliberately within the mainstream of systematic theology and ethics, thereby holding ‘doctrine’ closely together both with its Scriptural source (the text to be performed) and its practical outworking (the performance). So, for example, Kevin Vanhoozer’s recent work *The Drama of Doctrine* proceeds on the working assumption that “an *analogia dramatis* illumines both the nature and function of theology”.<sup>16</sup> The theologian, he suggests (in the midst of a thorough and wide-ranging exploration of the theme) is best associated with the figure of the dramaturge, the one who advises on how best to understand and perform the script.<sup>17</sup>

Work such as Vanhoozer’s builds consciously on the insights of what remains the most sustained and programmatic treatment of an *analogia dramatis* in theology, Hans Urs von Balthasar’s multi-volume *Theo-drama*<sup>18</sup>; but it sees that, despite the magnitude of von Balthasar’s agenda-setting contribution, there is plenty on the agenda to which due attention has not yet been granted. While recognising

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15 Stanley Hauerwas (with James Fodor) in Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (London: SPCK, 2004), 77.

16 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 243. This book offers a large scale development of germinal ideas contained in the essay ‘The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology’ in John G. Stackhouse (ed.), *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 61-106. It should be noted that *The Drama of Doctrine* was published when the essays in the present collection were already at an advanced stage of editing. Initial engagement with Vanhoozer in the volume was thus directed wholly to the aforementioned essay. At the suggestion of the editors, though, Joshua Edelman kindly reworked his critical response to Vanhoozer’s work late in the day in order to accommodate its more developed presentation.

17 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 32.

18 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, in 5 Volumes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988-98).

that theology as a whole is “full of dramatic tension, both in form and content”<sup>19</sup>, von Balthasar’s primary focus is on the dramatic nature of the gospel itself, as an account of human existence concerned with the interplay of divine and human action in the world.<sup>20</sup> Vanhoozer’s contribution, meanwhile, is to the field of biblical hermeneutics and theological method. Others have appropriated dramatic metaphor as an exploratory tool in Christian ethics.<sup>21</sup>

Metaphors of performance (artistic and other sorts) remain laden with theological possibilities which, if not endless, nonetheless extend far beyond the horizons of exploration and development to date. The present volume, which gathers together papers delivered at research colloquia or in the research seminar of the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts in the University of St Andrews during the period March 2001 – March 2004, is intended as a step in the direction of such exploration and development. It does not seek to offer a systematic or comprehensive analysis of the metaphor and its entailments for theology, but to point to some of the different directions (among others) in which such an analysis might duly proceed. To pick up Jeremy Begbie’s fruitful image in the postscript, the book sounds forth some (by no means all) of the theological resonances set in motion by the metaphor of performance. Part One attends very directly to some deliberate engagements between Christian theology and theatre, and enquires in particular about the importance and implications of theatre’s essentially embodied and performative nature as not just ‘word’, but ‘word in action’. Part Two takes the metaphor of performance in a broader sense, applying it to the ‘action’ of lives lived faithfully within religious traditions, and considering aspects of the Christian tradition in particular (worship, the interpretation of Scripture, the pursuit of goodness, and critical response to elements of contemporary culture) where such faithful performances might be sought and found. Finally, Part Three turns to the arts (including what are generally understood as ‘non-performative’ ones), and invites reflection on ways in which (since art is, as Wolterstorff reminds us, precisely a form of human *action*<sup>22</sup>) artistry may provide its own distinctive and important instances of the performance of the Christian tradition. The volume closes with a theological response by Jeremy Begbie, which both draws us back to some of the key threads that are woven through and hold it together, and points ahead to the challenges which remain for further careful work in the ongoing dialogue between theology and the arts.

I am grateful to all those whose contributions appear here, and to others who participated in the colloquia and research seminars from which the substance of this book is chiefly drawn. I am especially grateful to my former colleague, Steven

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19 Von Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, Vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 125.

20 Drama is fundamentally all about action (from the Greek *drao*, ‘to act’). The gospel, too, is about action; specifically “the history of an initiative on God’s part for his world, the history of a struggle between God and the creature over the latter’s meaning and salvation” (von Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, Vol.1, 125).

21 See, e.g., Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, and Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004).

22 See Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, x, 3, *et passim*.

Guthrie, for his invaluable assistance in the preparation and editing of this volume. Thanks are also due to Cambridge University Press for permission to publish some material in the chapters by Jolyon Mitchell and William Dyrness, and to Scala and Sieger Köder for permission to use the images included in Part Three. It is with sadness that I must note the death of Rosemary Muir Wright while this volume was in preparation. It is a privilege to be able to include her essay in it, a fitting tribute to a colleague and friend whose own daily work and life was, as all those who knew her will attest, identifiably a performance of the Christian gospel on so many different levels.

*Trevor Hart*

## Chapter 1

# Real Enactment: The Role of Drama in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar

Ben Quash

No one can appreciate the full truth of the Christian revelation unless he or she is a player within its distinctive dynamics – participating in the drama of God’s self-communication to the world and living out its implications in committed action. This is why von Balthasar does not write the part of his trilogy that deals with *knowing the true* until he has written the parts that deal with *seeing the glorious* and with *doing the good*. There ought not to be any presumption to having an analytical distance from God’s action in and for the world, in whose middle human beings are situated. How could anyone possibly hope to be able to step out of this drama – a drama that so fundamentally determines creaturely existence? How could anyone look at it from ‘outside’ or ‘above’? Such a viewing platform is not available. As von Balthasar himself puts it:

The life common to Christ and the Church is ... actual life poised between perdition and redemption, sinfulness and sanctity. The existence of sin within the field of force of grace, the impact, here and now, between despairing obduracy and crucified love, these, and not a colourless and static world of philosophy, are the matter of theology. This is why it cannot be expressed *solely* in the sleek and passionless form of the treatise, but demands movement, sharp debate ..., the virile language of deep and powerful emotion ...<sup>1</sup>

Theology is done not outside or above the drama of Christian living, it is itself part of the drama: and von Balthasar’s writings try to express this. He is ‘concerned with expounding the word of God, which is as much a word of life as a word of truth’.<sup>2</sup> And his theological heroes are those great teachers of the Church who managed never to be the victims of such a false separation between knowledge and life.

In this chapter, I want to isolate two of the central theological commitments that drive von Balthasar’s thought and which his turn to drama is designed to carry forward. They can be summarised at this stage as (first) a concern to take the linearity of history seriously, and therefore the uniqueness and ‘once only’ character of actions in the world. This is the context for what might be called the ‘tragic sensibility’ in his theology, which although it is often undermined by his synthesising and

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1 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), pp. 204–5.

2 Ibid., p. 183.

idealist instincts (as I have argued elsewhere),<sup>3</sup> nevertheless exists, and is perhaps the principal reason for Donald MacKinnon's admiration of his thought. We will approach this first Balthasarian commitment via a more general set of reflections on tragedy that will help to sharpen an appreciation of the importance of what von Balthasar is suggesting in his description of human lives as being situated in a real drama.

The second central commitment is that to the social and 'many-voiced' character of the Christian witness to truth in the world – a witness made up of many perspectives, and enacted in many 'missions'. This social and many-voiced quality is manifest in the scriptures themselves and by their role in Christian life and thought. It is also displayed in the character of the *Church*. We will come at this second area of investigation by seeing why neither lyric poetry nor (for the purposes of this essay) the *novel* quite meet von Balthasar's theological requirements – why drama is the only really satisfactory artistic embodiment of the social (and what von Balthasar believes to be its consummate form, the ecclesial). This will involve a comparison with some of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's discussions of genre.

We begin then with a look at tragedy, and its quintessential embodiment of something that von Balthasar takes to be true of *all* drama, and that adds to drama's attraction for him as a field of ideas: its linearity.

## 1. Tragedy

### *Two Versions of a Genre*

Even a brief tour through the historical application of this most famous of all genre terms will reveal a vast and internally contradictory set of understandings. For Aristotle, tragedy dealt with 'spudean' matters – that is to say the actions and passions of the noble, people of high character, the good, the superior and the heroic. Some later medieval interpreters supposed on the contrary that it dealt with the filth and foul deeds of the degenerate; things base, low and fetid; supposedly goat-like things (the word tragedy itself, literally interpreted, seeming to mean 'goat song'). In actual fact, all of the many medieval interpreters of tragedy were largely in the dark as to its ancient forms and origins, and made more or less random guesses on the basis of one reference in Boethius' sixth-century *Consolation of Philosophy*, some biased Christian material like that bequeathed by Isidore of Seville, and a little later in the fourteenth century some bits and pieces of Seneca that turned up in Padua. Thus, some think tragedy to be about the vile and unspeakable deeds of kings – primarily *crimes* – and others think it to be about any kind of lamentable misfortune – *sad things*. Its style is thought by some to be loud and bombastic, but by others mournful and song-like. And while some presumed tragedy to have a dramatic (or at least narrative) form, others (including Dante) were content to look on lyric poems

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3 Ben Quash, 'Drama and the ends of modernity', in L. Gardner, D. Moss, B. Quash and G. Ward, *Balthasar at the End of Modernity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).

as tragedies too. There was no unitary understanding of tragedy in the Middle Ages. It did not have to include a disaster factor (though neither did it in fifth-century BC Athens); there was little sense of it as a special genre of literature; and in most of medieval Europe there was a general lack of awareness and a puzzlement concerning the term *tragedia*.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this range of conflicting or ambiguous usages of the term, it seems worthwhile to try to narrow the tradition down, and to highlight *two* main applications. Boethius' influential reference in the sixth century is vital to this. Its appearance in Boethius' writing ties the idea of tragedy to the concept of Fortune. Fortune is repeatedly personified in medieval writing after Boethius as the mistress or goddess of good and bad luck, spinning her wheel. As H.A. Kelly says, it is an 'easy and overworked poetic ploy', and the Lady Fortune becomes so devoid of personality, and so little regards the persons over whom she rules, that 'Boredom must have been [her] frequent companion'.<sup>5</sup> Chaucer's host in his comments after the Monk's Tale makes his feelings on this matter abundantly clear. If medieval concepts of tragedy come to settle around this particular trope of Fortune and her wheel, then what we have in tragedy at the time of Chaucer is little more than a 'soporific' (to use H. A. Kelly's word)<sup>6</sup> – a predictable and characterless lamentation over misfortune. So this is the first possibility of a tragic 'form' – a 'soporific' on the vicissitudes of life.

But Chaucer, and thanks to him eventually Shakespeare, reconstituted the form he inherited in a way that has retained its vitality to the present day. Chaucer responded to those ideas that limited tragedy to the downward movement from prosperity to adversity. The complete cycle of Fortune's wheel was interrupted by Chaucer; his interest was in only a *part* of that trajectory in human affairs represented by the trope of the wheel. He concentrated on the decline into wretchedness. And the effect of this concentration was to renew the dramatic force of a linear progression of events rather than a cyclical one; a progression of events which could lead more compellingly to definite, final endings, and endings all the more terrible for their finality. This revitalized the genre, and it proceeded with time to leave the idea of Fortune behind. Here, then, we see a second possible 'tragic form' which we are more likely to recognize – and which is more the one that lies behind our metaphorical extension of it in modern usage: tragedy as the irreversible encounter with overmastering, destructive and estranging forces that press a terrible definiteness and constraint on what Donald MacKinnon might call our 'purposings'.<sup>7</sup>

Incidentally, by a combination of luck and imagination, Chaucer and Shakespeare returned to tragedy a lot of the qualities that gave it its force and momentum in ancient

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4 The best survey of the understanding of tragedy in this period (and I have drawn heavily on it in this section) is H. A. Kelly, *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy: from Aristotle to the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). On tragedy as 'goat song', see 104, 143.

5 Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

6 *Ibid.*

7 D. M. MacKinnon, *Explorations in Theology 5* (London: SCM, 1979), p. 105.

Greece. The subsequent rediscovery of the fifth-century tragedians – of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides – in many ways confirmed the emphases that Chaucer and Shakespeare chose to give to tragedy.

So, we have two contrasting ‘tragic forms’ in rough outline to take with us into a consideration of the possible attraction of drama for a theologian like von Balthasar:

- i) a cyclical one reflecting the perpetual vicissitudes of the world and the human’s place in it; and
- ii) a more linear one hinting at possibilities of ultimate and inescapable disintegration in individual human lives and perhaps, by extension, in the history of the world itself.

John Beer considered the word ‘vicissitude’ in his 1993 inaugural lecture in the English Faculty at Cambridge (entitled *Against Finality*)<sup>8</sup> and saw its latent potential as a term of consolation. Although Newton’s demonstrations seemed to subvert the metaphysical securities of earlier ages, Beer pointed out, the new universe Newton offered was at least one in which while everything fell nothing fell forever. All fallings were eventually caught up in that cyclical round of the planets which in turn allows us to *enjoy* the changes it creates. This sense of an ‘ultimate mercy’<sup>9</sup> in the Newtonian universe persists, and is traceable (to take one example) in the poetry of Wordsworth – here in the last stanza of an epitaph:

No motion has she now, no force  
 She neither hears nor sees,  
 Roll’d round in earth’s diurnal course  
 With rocks, and stones, and trees!<sup>10</sup>

In the solar system things end ‘neither in an endless falling nor in a fixed stasis but in a reversion to the cycling processes of ordinary nature’.<sup>11</sup> It is not that the epitaph presents a *joyous* vision; it is certainly sombre. But utter desolation is avoided by the fact that the last image is of trees and not of the deadness of rocks: a ‘marginal consolation’.<sup>12</sup> Though pre-Copernican, and pre-Newtonian, the shade of a Boethian attitude to human life and death lurks in the background, having found new and unexpected applications in a world re-envisioned by Newtonian physics. The epithet ‘tragic’ as Boethius used it might lend itself here to a vision of the world as a place

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8 John Beer, *Against Finality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

9 *Ibid.*, 31.

10 ‘Song’ in William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads with Other Poems in Two Volumes* by W. Wordsworth, 2nd edn., Vol. 2 (London: T. N. Longman and O. Rees, 1800). The poem is quoted by Coleridge in E.L. Griggs (ed.) *Coleridge: Collected Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71), vol. I, p. 479, and cited in *ibid.*, p. 30. As Beer notes, ‘when Wordsworth included the poem, untitled, in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* he changed “mov’d” to “rolled”’ (*Ibid.*, 45, note 53).

11 Beer, *Against Finality*, 31.

12 *Ibid.*

of vicissitudes and the marginal consolations they afford. Fortune's wheel might somehow have found the means to a new significance recast in the light of the insights of science and technology and the Newtonian revolution.

*Theodramatic Implications: Why Christianity Cannot Be Soporific*

But theologically (and this is the sort of question von Balthasar is inclined to pose) what are we to make of the idea of 'ultimate mercy' and a universe in which, to quote again, 'while everything falls nothing falls for ever'? Does it seem to conform to what is revealed in Jesus Christ? Or does the rival outline of tragic form as a progress through irreversible and absolutely destructive events come closer to being an adequate field of metaphor (though it too will need correction)?

There are a number of different metaphysical approaches which we might choose to associate with the 'vicissitude' model. Its influence on idealism and idealism's vision of the tragic could be explored here. As MacKinnon puts it:

in a certain sort of idealist theological tradition, the category of the decisively significant is ... replaced by the vague concept of a developing spiritual tradition which somehow plays down the heights and depths of human existence, mutes the cry of Jesus in Gethsemane, turning his agony into a kind of charade ... We have ... to resist the drift into a state of mind which regards all that passes before it as a kind of play ... empty in itself of deep and drastic significance.<sup>13</sup>

He goes on to characterize 'the most profound spiritual error of transcendent metaphysics' as *any* 'relegation of evil, whether physical or moral, to the category of *ster sis*'.<sup>14</sup>

The danger, as von Balthasar argues throughout his theodramatics, is clearly that of 'drawing the teeth' not only of human suffering, but also of the once-for-all character of the person and work of Christ. God's affirmation of his world – demonstrated in the death and resurrection of Jesus – seems to require humanity not to get enmeshed in doctrines of 'eternal recurrence', or a smooth evolution propelled simply by resources internal to the creation itself. God's pledge in Jesus Christ is a free, personal commitment to the finite. As von Balthasar points out on numerous occasions, it cannot be recast as some kind of impersonally valid natural law. Moreover, this free personal commitment – this unreserved self-giving which is an absolute yes to humanity, requires with absolute acuteness a response. The absoluteness of the 'word' addressed by God to humanity suggests that the reply – if we believe that humanity is given space and freedom to reply – will have an absoluteness about it too.

One of the areas in which von Balthasar and MacKinnon are most at one is in their conviction that there are real and not simply illusory outcomes at stake in the harsh necessity that makes the cross a central part of God's coming to us. This is not

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13 MacKinnon, *Explorations in Theology* 5, 58–59.

14 *Ibid.*, 103.

make-believe, or the ‘ballet dance of ideas’.<sup>15</sup> Judas having one moment slipped out into the night slips all the way into the oblivion of a bloody death. Jerusalem finds its daughters warned to weep for themselves, suggesting a freedom that has resulted in an *actually* ‘irretrievable disaster’;<sup>16</sup> that the city’s refusal to accept what Jesus represents will have actually irretrievable consequences.

Christians cannot deny the personal, particular, concrete quality of God’s action on the creation’s behalf – its fleshiness and its bloodiness. Only a view strangely detached from this can see Calvary as a mere vicissitude. If this is the fierce way that God sues for our love (to echo the poet Geoffrey Hill<sup>17</sup>), then we have little cause to take soporific consolation in it. MacKinnon excels in driving home the implications of this: our approach to the mysteries of that deed requires that we ‘evacuate our understanding and imagination of the illusion that we shall find here a metaphysically assimilable solution of the problems set by the world’s existence’.<sup>18</sup> Instead, we are ‘alerted to refuse the solution of a humanly tidy dismissal of life’s roughest edges’.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, as David Ford has pointed out in an essay on ‘Tragedy and atonement’,<sup>20</sup> the tragic is not negated by Christ, but taken into a transformation that sharpens it (though the category of the tragic is also revealed not to be adequate by itself). Those who preach Christ can, as 2 Corinthians indicates, be to some ‘a fragrance from death to death’. In fact the whole urgency of the Gospel seems really to spring from the possibility of tragic disobedience. Ford is in the company of a long line of Christian thinkers, from at least Irenaeus’ time, who insist that humanity retains freedom to decide for or against grace: a person can refuse it, in which case he or she freely chooses separation from God (that is, death). Thus, with the advent of the grace of Christ, there is a heightening of the danger implied in freedom. On this account, what is at stake is an eternal Yes or No. And as a thoroughly Balthasarian perspective would have it, only after Christ does there arise the concentration of satanic and anti-Christian powers in world history. Thus the eschatological saving events do not overtake and supersede the drama of existence, they actually raise it to its real stature. Christ’s work is, to quote MacKinnon again, ‘no wilful wresting of an unambiguous triumph over circumstance that will, by its seeming transparency, satisfy our own conceit’.<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, the path God must take for our sakes requires us to shun any facile teleology. It renews our sense of the deeply intractable in human life.

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15 Ibid., 68.

16 Ibid., 194.

17 Geoffrey Hill, ‘Lachrimae Amantis’, in ‘Lachrimae: or seven tears figured in seven passionate Pavans’, *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 151.

18 MacKinnon, 68.

19 Ibid.

20 David Ford, ‘Tragedy and Atonement’, in Kenneth Surin (ed.), *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 117–30.

21 MacKinnon, *Explorations in Theology* 5, 137.

*The Dramatic Character of Time*

It will have become clear by now that I consider the second of the two tragic forms outlined above – the linear path through irretrievable affliction – to be the more appropriate to the shape of human existence defined by the revelation in Christ. It is of course the tragic form with which we are more familiar anyway. The metaphorical extension of the genre term tragedy to the ‘quick, broken movement’<sup>22</sup> of Jesus’ short life is appropriate in ways that it would take a long time to analyze exhaustively – and in some ways the metaphor is inappropriate too. Yet if we believe that Jesus Christ in some way defines the human situation, and reveals its real dimensions, then part of what he defines is its harshly constraining realities. This harshness is never for a moment denied by Christ.

That said, tragedy is not despair, and for von Balthasar most certainly, the emphasis on the momentousness and irreversibility of historical action in the theodrama (both Christ’s and ours) should certainly *not* issue in resignation, nor in a negative evaluation of our finitude. On the contrary, it should positively enhance our sense of the significance of each moment of time, and of the action of human agents in time. The dramatic sensibility given its acutest expression in tragedy is ‘very different from the mood of tired impatience which finds nothing new under the sun’.<sup>23</sup>

A contrast might be drawn here with what is arguably the characteristic theatrical genre of the twentieth century, this being neither comedy nor tragedy, but tragicomedy: that undecided, undecidable alternation between laughter and tears (*never* conclusive) which is given especially concentrated form in the Theatre of the Absurd – funny, and yet ‘desolate’, ‘terminal’ and ‘obsessional’.<sup>24</sup> The Theatre of the Absurd depicts the world as having a ‘fundamentally mysterious and indecipherable nature’, and characters afflicted with feelings of ‘loss, purposelessness, and bewilderment’. It leaves the observer ‘baffled in the face of disjointed, meaningless or repetitious dialogues, incomprehensible behaviour, and plots which deny all notion of logical or “realistic” development’.<sup>25</sup> The Theatre of the Absurd gives us a powerful portrayal of the human condition as ‘one of ignorance, delusion, paralysis’, mixed up with tantalizing ‘flashes of human sympathy, hope, and wit’.<sup>26</sup>

*Waiting for Godot* (first staged in English in Cambridge in 1955) is one of the most influential plays of the post-war period. The two tramps in the wilderness are in thrall to the arbitrary. Alternately frenzied and directionless, they obey an injunction they don’t understand, for reasons they don’t understand: to wait for Godot. Each act

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22 Ibid., 79.

23 Ibid., 6.

24 Descriptions of Beckett’s work in particular; see ‘Samuel Barclay Beckett’, in Margaret Drabble (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 5th edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 78.

25 ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, in *ibid.*, 3.

26 ‘*Waiting for Godot*’, in *ibid.*, 1038.

ends with the same exchange between the two tramps, ‘Well, shall we go?’ ‘Yes, let’s go’, and the stage direction, ‘They do not move.’

And all Beckett’s plays show us characters like this – *Endgame*, ‘a one-act drama of frustration, irascibility, and senility’,<sup>27</sup> features a blind man called Hamm and his attendant Clov, and Hamm’s ‘accursed progenitors’ – his parents – whom he keeps in two rubbish bins on stage; *Krapp’s Last Tape* is a monologue in which an elderly and down-at-heel man called Krapp tries to recall the intensity of earlier days by playing himself recordings of his own younger self; *Happy Days* portrays Winnie buried in a mound, up to her waist in the first act, and up to her neck in the second, but still ‘attached to the carefully itemized contents of her handbag’<sup>28</sup> – toothpaste, hairbrush, spectacles, hat.

If we look at the Greek tragedies or the tragedies of Shakespeare, we find worlds in which time is super-charged. The characters stand and face decisions of momentous significance; decisions which press upon them on which lives and loves hang; decisions on which they will be judged. There is a fierce fullness to be reckoned with in these tragic universes – a fullness of meaning and irresistible demand, in which death can be made sense of and greatness is possible. If we look at the drama of the nineteenth century we will see a change underway. In Chekhov’s plays, and Ibsen’s, people yawn, are bored, are afraid of their own dullness and obscurity, fear most of all that they are non-entities. Mundanity takes the place of the extremity of the plays of earlier ages. Entrapment takes the place of great falls. Their world is stale. Look at the Theatre of the Absurd, and the change is complete. Time is purposeless, meandering, flat. It is undifferentiated. ‘What time is it?’ asks Hamm in *Endgame*; ‘The same as usual’, replies Clov. In *Waiting for Godot*, the tramps make what is clearly a hopeless attempt to conjure a destiny for themselves (we are not alone, waiting for the night; waiting instead for Godot); in *Endgame*, all Hamm waits for is his next painkiller.

One of the things von Balthasar is most concerned to demonstrate by his orientation to drama is that this flatness and staleness of time – this movement which leads nowhere in particular, but is just a sort of drifting towards death – cannot ever be Christian time, even if it may overwhelmingly seem to be time as felt by a certain modern sensibility. To take up discipleship of Christ – to agree to be led by God – is to have time recharged with intense significance again, to know oneself summoned to a sort of destiny, though not a solitary and self-aggrandising one but rather a social one in which people and cities and the creation are made new. It is to see one’s time as given for the purpose of witness and transformation. It is to be called to performance. The time of the Christian is therefore more nearly like the time of fierce plenitude – that fullness of meaning – to which Shakespeare and the tragedians testify; at its heart there stands the urgency of the divine call which addresses the whole of a person – everything he or she is – and asks that person to make something of his or her life.

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27 ‘Samuel Barclay Beckett’, in *ibid.*, 78.

28 *Ibid.*

[The] point of contact between God and the world in Christ is the eschatological turning-point of the ages. The Cross is the final point within the old aeon, and the Resurrection is the beginning of the new aeon. It is for this reason that the Cross is not merely the image of the principle inherent within the created world – as if this were but a vale of tears with suffering as its embodiment. Rather, the Cross lifts up on itself the whole inadequacy of the world, in order to bear the sin to Hell and to set man free for God. This raises the question of the meaning of human *existence at the turning-point of the ages*.<sup>29</sup>

To be sure, drama in von Balthasar's vision inhibits ambitious metaphysical constructions in a necessary way. But in order to avoid the kind of trivialisation that would empty of significance the complexity, the pain, the weight of decision-making, and the call to responsible 'performance' that are intrinsic to human existence (reducing them all to the facile rotations of a Boethian wheel, perhaps), drama, and especially the super-drama taken up and transformed in Christ, also constrains us to acknowledge the fact that finitude and non-repeatable particularity can genuinely mediate the divine purpose. Finite people and possibilities can be the bearers of glory. This means that the path to holiness - to sainthood - is not principally one of withdrawal from all the contingent aspects of personhood, according to von Balthasar, but doing things that are uniquely one's own to do. Von Balthasar's use of drama thus shows the same concern with the concrete as can be seen in his theological aesthetics (*The Glory of the Lord*). As in the aesthetics, so in the theo-drama, what is aimed at is a more full entry into specifics, into *particularity*. Becoming holy as an actor in the theo-drama means becoming more distinctively *oneself* (though always for the sake of Church and world).

For each Christian God has an Idea which fixes his place within the membership of the Church; this Idea is unique and personal, embodying for each his appropriate sanctity.<sup>30</sup>

And again:

No-one is so much himself as the saint, who disposes himself to God's plan ...<sup>31</sup>

Above all, it is Christ who represents this capacity of the finite and the once-only to be the vehicle of the fullness of the divine presence and purpose. And here is where a thoroughly Christian view of the world will see more than can be seen by the sort of dramatic theory I have been outlining above. Here is where the analogies between tragedy and a Christian understanding reach their limits. For drama (and tragedy most intensively of all) teaches us about the inescapability of the linear and historical, the inescapability too of the limitations of physical, creaturely space, and this is of great

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29 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, Joseph Fessio and John Riches (eds), (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 517.

30 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Thérèse of Lisieux: The Story of a Mission* (London and New York: Sheed & Ward, 1953), xii.

31 *Ibid.*, xiii.

importance. But *Christ*, meanwhile, teaches us that these ‘tragic’ limits of concrete human existence need not prevent the expression of the divine life itself. Yes, our finitude imposes (MacKinnon’s words again) an ‘obstinate, ineluctable truncation’ on human effort that even belongs to ‘the very substance of Jesus’ defeat’.<sup>32</sup> But at the same time, Jesus Christ’s acceptance of the human situation, as an act of obedience to the Father, expresses an eternal response to the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. As von Balthasar insists in his theodramatics, God’s ways are displayed in this work of engagement with the extremities of the world’s plight, in this endurance and agony and this defeat and destruction. This is so even though the engagement with extremity seems to jeopardise the very constitution of the godhead:

Jesus is the authentic and unsurpassable interpretation of God. In the apparently finite medium of his deeds, sufferings, and attitudes the ever-greater of the infinite God is made known.<sup>33</sup>

At this point, I want to move to a consideration of another of the key theological gains von Balthasar makes by his turn to drama – a gain in terms of what it enables him to say about the *diversified* and *communal* character of Christian life before God. Our way of approach to this theme will be through a brief reflection on genre.

## 2. Poetry, Novels and Drama

### *The Possibilities and Limits of Poetry*

I quote below a passage from a book by J. Neville Ward on prayer, called *The Following Plough*. It is very striking for the way in which what it seeks to say about poetry, as against prose, is very much the sort of thing von Balthasar would say about drama:

T. S. Eliot once said that prose is the language of ideals, while poetry is the language of reality. It is an idea that surprises people and makes them think at first that it is the wrong way round, that surely prose deals with reality, poetry with ideals. However, if you stay with it you see the kind of truth it has. Prose, using logical procedures as traditionally understood, is the appropriate vehicle for coming to a conclusion, making a practical recommendation, finding a solution to a problem. Poetry is the kind of language in which a whole situation is presented and its feeling communicated, so that you know what it means to see a certain segment of reality with your whole feeling self, to contemplate a person or an object sympathetically enough for it to exercise its full force upon you. Pages of prose could be written to set out what Blake’s poem ‘The Sick Rose’ is about, but, however full such treatment might be, something, indeed the all-important thing, eludes

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32 D. M. MacKinnon, *Themes in Theology: The Threefold Cord* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 163.

33 Von Balthasar in Medard Kehl and Werner Löser (eds), *The Von Balthasar Reader* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 341.

that procedure. You can find the poem real, and presumably share something at any rate of the experience of the poet, only by living encounter. You have simply to read the poem and you will come face to face with it.<sup>34</sup>

Drama, for von Balthasar, is not going to lend itself easily to the tidy business of ‘coming to a conclusion, making a practical recommendation, or finding a solution to a problem’. Whereas the monological character of much prose may make it a thoroughly useful vehicle for presenting a series of events as a *fait accompli*, and for suggesting a finished product from which all the intermediate disagreements and conflicts have been ironed out – thus a genre good for instrumentalised uses – drama is the kind of genre in which ‘a whole situation is presented and its feeling communicated’.

What, for Ward, seems to characterize poetry most certainly characterizes drama for von Balthasar. It finds its realization through calling its audience to a ‘living encounter’. Something *authentic* is opened up by this encounter (Ward calls it the ‘all-important thing’); something that we reach when (for example) *sympathy* is allowed a role in our knowing activity, thus enabling a new quality of knowledge – perhaps even, in some cases, a special kind of knowledge not attainable in any other way.

For von Balthasar, though, the theological value of poetry is limited. This is something I have shown at greater length elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> It would not surprise him that its commendation here, by Ward, is in the context of a book of devotional writing. Poetry of the sort Ward is referring to works with the perspective of immediate feeling and individual association. It is what von Balthasar (borrowing categories from Hegel) would call ‘lyric’ in its generic character: it works by the individual’s integration of metaphors, images and associations, and this can have the consequence that the shared, public world of experience and action is either assimilated or excluded from consideration. Von Balthasar says that this ‘lyricism’ results in ‘a romanticism remote from reality’ and in the Church produces a pious but largely ‘affective’ theology.<sup>36</sup> Drama’s appropriateness to the expression of Christian theology, meanwhile, is demonstrated in the interaction of individual (lyric) persons with one another, and with the collectively-held content of Christian faith. The ‘truth’ of this revelation is a truth that discloses itself not only in terms of life and decision, but also incorporation in a community.

### *The Possibilities of The Novel: Mikhail Bakhtin*

Might there be other genres that *are* a match for drama in this regard? It is at this point that I want to give room to the claims of Mikhail Bakhtin for the *novel*. I want

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34 J. Neville Ward, *The Following Plough* (Cambridge MA: Cowley Publications, 1984), 111; I am grateful to Anna Williams of Cambridge for pointing me to this book.

35 Cf. Quash, ‘Drama and the ends of modernity’, 145–59.

36 Von Balthasar, *Explorations I*, 208.

to give room to Bakhtin partly because his arguments for the merits of the novel (rather like Ward's for poetry) lend themselves very readily to adaptation to von Balthasar's case for the value of drama. He generates useful categories which help one appreciate all the more fully why theodramatics is such a good idea. But partly too I want to give room to Bakhtin so as to be able to suggest a crucial contrast between Bakhtin's preference for the novel, on the one hand, and von Balthasar's for drama, on the other.

Bakhtin thought there had been a widespread failure of literary criticism to do justice to the novel in its own right. Poetry seemed to him to receive extensive treatment as a form of literary 'art', while the novel was treated as debased and hybrid, haphazard in its use of the purer forms of the language of 'poetics', heavily diluted with 'non-' or 'extra-artistic' discourse. Bakhtin, by contrast, called the novel the 'genre of genres', and attempted to redress the injustice done to it.

He did this first by celebrating the very thing the literary critical establishment (in his view) disparaged: the novel's affirmation of the aesthetic value of the ordinary – its use of everyday speech. Vigour and creativity, both social and individual, are sustained and renewed precisely in and through such everyday speech, he argued. This in fact is where I imagine his defence of the 'prosaic'<sup>37</sup> quality of the novel would lie if J. Neville Ward's critique of prose were put to him (the critique of prose as using 'logical procedures', for instance). Bakhtin frequently attacks the sort of 'monologism' that would frame the superabundance and indeterminacy of novelistic facts in the terms of a unifying explanatory theory. The multiple meanings generated in the movement and interpenetration of people's everyday communicative activity (meanings that the novel so sensitively registers) cannot be exhaustively mapped. No all-encompassing pattern is exhibited by them. They represent a myriad 'tiny and unsystematic alterations', all of which contribute to the continued making of language and culture, and they do so, often, in wholly unpredictable ways.

Second, Bakhtin celebrates the novel's unfinalizability. Again, a contrast with Ward's criticism of prose emerges here. Again, there is a marked similarity with von Balthasar's interest in the 'linearity' of drama. Unfinalizability is for Bakhtin that which most nearly shares the character of 'real historicity'.<sup>38</sup> It is a concept that reflects his commitment to ethical responsibility and his belief in the manifold possibilities present to us in every moment in our real lives in time (a reality which the novel can honour and reflect). Unfinalizability safeguards the reality of individual and social creativity and freedom in the midst of unfolding processes and events in time. Every reality 'is only one of many possible realities; it is not inevitable, not arbitrary, it bears within itself other possibilities'.<sup>39</sup> There is room here for human

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37 See Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1990), 27ff.

38 *Ibid.*, 47.

39 'Epic and Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 37.

agency and choice, in shaping what comes to pass in the ongoing development of the world's story.

And finally, dialogue, which for Bakhtin reflects the 'nonself-sufficiency' of the self.<sup>40</sup> 'Life by its very nature is dialogic', Bakhtin writes. 'To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with ... eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium.'<sup>41</sup>

In the view of Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson, real dialogism as Bakhtin advocates it will 'incarnate a world whose unity is essentially one of multiple voices, whose conversations never reach finality and cannot be transcribed in monologic form'. The unity of the world will then appear as it really is: 'polyphonic'.<sup>42</sup> The world is depicted enthusiastically by Bakhtin as like a great and chaotic medieval fair or Rabelaisian carnival, in which the merging and hybridization of languages is the healthy and creative norm. Images of perpetual surplus abound here. All the participants supplement each other, each having the richness of a unique field of vision, but each profiting from the bounty of the vision of those around her, which is necessarily additional to her own, and helps to fulfil (though never to finalize) her own sense of herself.

This, it seems to me, is pre-eminently a dramatic vision, and it is defined over against the epic one, just as von Balthasar's dramatic vision is. It is a dramatic vision, even when talking about the novel, because it is concerned with the assimilation and encounter and interpenetration of discourses; it is concerned to register the many ways that the discourses of ordinary life are continually being re-accentuated. A dramatic approach to the characterisation of reality can combine many styles. It, like the novel, can be a 'style of styles, an orchestration of the diverse languages of everyday life into a heterogeneous sort of whole'.<sup>43</sup> And if its characterizations are good, it does not finalize the lives and thoughts of its characters and the events they undergo, but evokes the 'endlessly forward momentum'<sup>44</sup> which, for Bakhtin, also characterizes historicity.

In drama, as in the novel, we encounter *polyphony*. To be frank, polyphony as Bakhtin describes it (and he does not describe it in relation to drama) is to be found only in novels by Dostoevsky (and in only *some* of *them*!). But the possibilities that are opened up by this glimpse take on a great significance for Bakhtin. What Dostoevsky so uniquely offers us is a dialogical alternative to any systematic conception of truth, because of the integrity he allows to his characters, and the creativity they are

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40 'Towards a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book', Appendix 2 in *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 287.

41 Ibid., 293.

42 Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 61.

43 Ibid., 17.

44 Ibid., 184.

permitted to exercise, even over himself as authorial emcee. He allows himself to be *surprised* by his characters. Bakhtin argues that it is possible for an author like Dostoevsky to be affected by his various ‘voice-ideas’ as he engages and develops them. These ‘voice-ideas’ can come to represent particular persons and their integral points of view on the world: ‘When two such voice-ideas come to interact, they may produce a dialogue changing both of them and giving rise to new insights and new dialogues.’<sup>45</sup> Dostoevsky understood this, according to Bakhtin, because ‘to speak paradoxically – [he] thought not in thoughts but in points of view, consciousnesses, voices’.<sup>46</sup> Thus it is that, in his hands, characters can come to be ‘*not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse*’.<sup>47</sup> The characters’ ‘truths’ are not merely partial, not merely relative to the author’s overarching ‘truth’. The author renounces, on one level, his ‘essential surplus of meaning’,<sup>48</sup> so enabling his characters to be relatively free and independent.<sup>49</sup>

Of course, in order to be able to create a novel at all, the author has to be able to hang on to a second kind of surplus, which Bakhtin calls ‘that indispensable minimum of pragmatic, purely *information-bearing* “surplus” necessary to carry forward the story’.<sup>50</sup> He puts his characters in situations with each other, makes opportunities for their mutual engagement. But in a really polyphonic encounter, what happens after that should be well and truly unfinalizable. One image to illustrate this unfinalizability premised on the relative independence of the voice-ideas might be that of ‘character zones’: the field of those tendencies, habits, concerns which congregate around any one figure. In a literary work, these characters participate in an overall scheme that must be sufficiently extended to cope with the expansions and contractions in their inner relation; to allow them, as Francesca Murphy puts it, to ‘create a mobile “space”’ as they ‘pull away from one another in their various directions’.<sup>51</sup> And, to draw (with Murphy) on Jacques Maritain’s thought in this regard, the space can then be ‘filled with significative meanings ... tensions and pressures (silences, voids ... blanks reserved for the unexpressed)’.<sup>52</sup> These may well not all have been anticipated by the author herself.

It is worth emphasizing that Bakhtin was aware of the difference between this kind of diversified polyphony, and mere *cacophony*. He did not suppose that a lot

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45 Ibid., 237.

46 Emerson (ed.), *Problems*, 93.

47 Ibid., 7.

48 Ibid., 73.

49 In his notes ‘Towards a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book’, Bakhtin explicitly draws an analogy between this and the Christian idea that God created morally free people (285). ‘God may argue with people, as he argues with Job, but Job retains the power to agree or disagree, if only silently’ (240).

50 Emerson (ed.), *Problems*, 73.

51 Francesca Murphy, *Christ the Form of Beauty: A Study in Theology and Literature* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 49.

52 Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953), 365.

of random, unconnected voices all speaking at once was to be celebrated as a blow against monological form. He sought literary theory capable of appreciating the immeasurably important reality of voices that genuinely *interact* in time – and he did allow the language of unity (*always provided* it presupposed diversity, rather than seeking to deny or suppress it) to have a place in this regard. He attributed deep importance to experiences of ‘dialogic’ concordance (for example, ‘the unified “feel” of a conversation’), and he indicated his belief that when we meet such unity and appreciate it properly, we are nearer to understanding the ‘unity of “truth”’. Really interesting unity is ‘not the unity of a single proposition, however complex’;<sup>53</sup> it is what might be called ‘unity of ... event’.<sup>54</sup>

Admittedly, he leaves such ideas rather vague, but they are of great importance. They have something to do with the way that ‘[i]n conversations with independent participants arguing intensely about matters of great concern to them, the whole may have a unifying spirit, regardless of the divergence among positions’.<sup>55</sup> We may lack an easy vocabulary for that kind of unity, and that may be one reason why we lapse quickly into scepticism about its possibility). Where static unities are concerned, we can always give them the name *structure*, and we discriminate between kinds of structure. But there is value in searching out appropriate terms and metaphors for ‘the unity of event, and for the different kinds of “eventness” we have experienced’.<sup>56</sup>

Tantalizingly, for a theological reader, Bakhtin saw the provisional possibility of the Church representing a kind of polyphonic unity, as ‘a community of unmerged souls, where sinners and righteous men come together’. He also made a comparison with Dante’s world, ‘where multi-leveledness is extended into eternity’.<sup>57</sup> But it was precisely because of his distrust of an intruding unity of structure, rather than one of event, that he afterwards rejected the comparisons. He concluded the Church is ‘too static, too closed ... and too easy to conflate into an ideological and monologic unity’.<sup>58</sup>

Here is where what has seemed to be a remarkable similarity between Bakhtin and von Balthasar in terms of their intellectual instincts (and targets) breaks down somewhat. Von Balthasar shares with Bakhtin a concern with polyphony, historicity and dialogue. Indeed, it is Bakhtin’s emphasis on dialogue that above all resonates with what is at the core of von Balthasar’s theological project: his desire to open up the inner structure of God’s self-disclosure to the world, and to show that this structure has the character of address, response, and counter-response, in an ongoing, ramifying series of articulations of truth, goodness and beauty, all born out of the mutual interaction of God and his free creatures. But von Balthasar holds out – where Bakhtin (after a brief dalliance) does not – for the possibility of there being

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53 Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 237.

54 Emerson (ed.), *Problems*, p. 21.

55 Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 256.

56 Ibid.

57 Emerson (ed.), *Problems*, 26–27.

58 Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 255.

a genuinely Christian embodiment of that polyphonic, unfinalizable and dialogical ideal in the form of the Church. It is this key concern of von Balthasar's with the Church that I want to highlight before closing.

To do so, though, means also highlighting the way von Balthasar handles a topic to which the doctrine of the Church is fundamentally linked: namely, Scripture.

### *Von Balthasar's Dramatic Theology of Scripture and the Church*

All contributors to the practice and worship of the Church – and preachers and theologians in special ways – become the inheritors of the 'many-voiced' legacy of traditional genres and their residues of accumulated wisdom. It is their task to create a 'unity of event' out of this diversity (while allowing it to remain unfinalizable and dialogical). As von Balthasar has pointed out, working with the generic plurality of the Bible itself, as it has been given to us by the Church, is at the heart of this task. None of its plurality must be suppressed. He writes,

what seems on the surface to be a book is inwardly 'spirit and life' ... '*Biblia*' is a collection of writings of every possible literary genre, including occasional writings (the apostolic letters), poems, prayers, proverbs, laws, chronicles, oracles, secret revelations, laments, sober instruction for the Christian life ... This apparent confusion is criss-crossed by threads, open and hidden, linking everything with everything else; thus a kind of vast net is created ... within which the attested and generative word of God can traverse unhindered. The net embraces the contents, and yet it does not hold them fast: it is so loose and broad that, in principle, it loses nothing of the contents, but it does not claim to be itself the whole content.<sup>59</sup>

All of these genres are valuable. Each has its own surplus of meaning to contribute to the others. Each genre will have particular strengths at opening up and exploring particular aspects of reality. Each will have a particular range and depth of penetration. Thus the theologian who has the ability to command a wide set of genres will find his or her capacity to conceptualize, to interpret, and to participate in the life of the Christian community and the wider world, enriched in consequence. Kevin Vanhoozer puts it as follows:

[T]he task of systematic theology is to 'knit together' the diverse genres of the Bible into the tensile unity of a dialogue. Interpretation may require the service of concepts, but the end result is not a static system so much as a dynamic equilibrium. To the extent that we learn to prolong canonical practices in our own contexts, Scripture becomes efficacious in 'educating' our feelings and in shaping our 'settled instincts'. If there is something that absorbs us, it is not merely narratives or stories, but the whole intratextual dialogue. What we have in the Bible is an absorbing theological conversation.<sup>60</sup>

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59 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory II: Dramatis Personae: Man in God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 108–9.

60 Kevin Vanhoozer, 'Taking Every Thought Captive? "Greek" Orthodoxy, Practical Reason and the Ethics of Biblical Interpretation' (Paper delivered at King's College London,

Theology in its turn can try to encourage the ‘dialogization, and conflictual interaction of genres’, not only in relation to the biblical genres, but in relation to contemporary voices inside and outside the Church, the voices of other theologians, and so on. Its images can activate and develop some of the latent potential of the ‘heteroglossia’ it inherits, the wisdom such languages could impart in the right situation. The theologian, like the novelist and the playwright, can draw ‘dotted lines’<sup>61</sup> between languages that in everyday life have not yet entered into a profound dialogue. He can stage dialogues between the results of these dialogues as well. It is something like this, I think, that von Balthasar both advocates and achieves in his own theology when it is working well. This is not only because of its quite extraordinary (for a Roman Catholic theology of its time) attention to scriptural sources and imagery – much of which it shares with Barth’s approach (indeed, it may well be that it is precisely to Barth that von Balthasar owes this concern to create a pervasively biblical theology). It is also because of von Balthasar’s hugely ambitious experimentation with the concepts and characteristic forms of expression he finds in Christian tradition, literary thought, ancient and modern philosophy, and so on – an experimentation that marked his theology from its earliest days, when he aligned himself with the *aggiornamento* in Catholic theology, and remained a feature of it until his death. At his best, he genuinely wishes to ‘stage dialogues’ between these concepts and forms of expression – to inhabit the worlds of discourse to which they belong, to enquire after what they make thinkable, and to see what sparks they will strike off each other. He is happy to acknowledge that in many cases such language and concepts will have to remain in suspended tension – unreconciled within the Christian thinker’s current capacities to understand and interpret them. But he can accommodate this possibility because truth, for him, is dramatic; the interpretative key to all the trajectories of thought there are in the world is given in and with the creative, redeeming and sanctifying activity of God in relation to his creatures: this is the world’s dramatic heart. Dramatic tension between a plurality of perspectives is not always, in other words, a sign of failure in the human appropriation of truth, it may be the disclosure of a deeper level of truthful reality than our rational minds are accustomed to allow us to appreciate.

The pluriform (or ‘plurivox’) character of Scripture is corresponded to perfectly in von Balthasar’s theology by the ‘constellation’ of forms that he sees as constitutive of the Church in its irreducible sociality. The ecclesial analogy here to the diversity of genres in Scripture is the diversity of saints – each of them a unique and distinctive transposition of some aspect of the Christ-form (the *Gestalt Christi*). In his doctrine of the Church, as in his account of Scripture, there is a governing concern with articulating the dramatic heart of reality by which Scripture and Church alike are animated. Inasmuch as both Scripture and Church are participations in (and mediations of) the Christ-form, both must share the Christ-form’s dramatic structure. To look at the Church rightly, von Balthasar thinks, you need to have seen that it is a

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April 1997), 19.

61 Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 247.

dazzling firmament of people in interrelationship – many of them highly diverse, but none of them dispensable in making legible the full riches of Christ. The point is not to see some one thing that really makes them all the same. The Church is embodied in them because of and not despite their collective character. Their individuality in each case finds consummation in the loving gift of the others. The fullness of the Church is a fullness that establishes the integrity of the individual form even as it emphasises dependence upon (indeed, definition by) others, in a set of dramatic relations. And their unity is therefore something more like a ‘dialogic concordance’ than it is a monological statement of identity; it is more a unity of event than a unity of structure. It is polyphonic.

### *The Limits of the Novels*

This vision is full of Bakhtinian affinities, to be sure. Von Balthasar’s theodramatics, like Bakhtin’s theory of the novel, delivers a decisive blow to the epic genre. The monologically narrated, universalizing world of the epic stands condemned: ‘There is no place in the epic world for openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy. There are no loopholes in it through which we glimpse the future; it suffices unto itself, neither supposing any continuation nor requiring it.’<sup>62</sup> There is also no room for the plurality of perspectives that both arises from and facilitates this ‘openendedness’.

But von Balthasar is in my view right to privilege drama over the novel in realising this end. Bakhtin cannot quite make the novel do all he wants it to.

My reservation about Bakhtin’s theory is not a reservation about what it ends up endorsing. It is a reservation about whether the novel is quite up to it – and I regard the difficulty he has in identifying novels that *actually* exemplify what he is talking about to be evidence for this. In staged drama there actually *are* many voices; interacting interpretations. There actually *are* spaces which can be ‘filled with significant meanings’ (as Khovacs illustrates excellently elsewhere in this book with his account of Kevin Klines’ performance of Hamlet). There actually *are* ‘blanks reserved for the unexpressed’. One might want to add the proviso here that improvised drama will realise this possibility even better than scripted (authored plays being that bit nearer to novels), but there is still an excess of possibility that drama has over the novel. Maybe Bakhtin neglected drama because of the dreariness of the examples that were to hand. What is clear, though, is that von Balthasar’s option for drama is able to achieve all that Bakhtin looked for in the novel and probably more.

### **3. Conclusion**

The two parts of this chapter have read von Balthasar’s work in a spirit of affirmation – and they have in particular affirmed his choice of a dramatic field of metaphor for

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62 ‘Epic and Novel’, p. 16.

two things that it makes it possible for his theology to prioritise. The first has been the linearity of time, and the sense that there is genuinely something at stake in how we live in time. The second has been the polyphonic character of Christian life, witnessed to both in the Scriptures and in the Church.

The affirmative treatment of von Balthasar's work offered here should not obscure the case I have argued in other contexts than this,<sup>63</sup> that despite the inherent advantages his genre of preference has over (say) Bakhtin's, he can hardly be said to have made the most of its possibilities in every instance – as is increasingly remarked upon by students of his theo-drama who come with theatrical interests and expect to find more consideration given to forms of drama such as improvisation than there is. Moreover, despite its best intentions, his theodramatics sometimes fails to be as much of a 'style of styles, an orchestration of ... diverse languages' as it might like to be.<sup>64</sup> To be such a thing, its business (unlike the 'centripetal' forces of poetics, which Bakhtin so resisted) needed to have been even more bound up than it was with the 'competition, dialogization, and conflictual interaction of genres'. Its form needed to have been more in tune than it was with its content. It needed to have been a theology more genuinely open to the future; one which exercised a more stringent critical reservation about its own structures and the wider ecclesial structures within which it was brought to birth. Although his theology contains a strong endorsement of the idea of performance, it also contains the seeds of an undramatic reliance on a standardized model of Christian obedience to which the variety of saintly missions is asked to conform, and which it is expected to display.

Nonetheless, where von Balthasar's theology is at its strongest is in the way that, with a powerful conviction, it aims to recall Christian life from the lyricism which too often passes itself off as 'spirituality', and from the dry-as-dust scholastic text-books which he found so infuriating, to a corporate, and whole-hearted common task: the live performance in solidarity with others of witnessing to and sharing in Christ's all-encompassing mission to the world. As he puts it, a 'too-individualistic idea of contemplation', wherever it is found, will not be fruitful for the Church. Holiness, to be Christian, must 'radiate out' into the active apostolate.<sup>65</sup> And it is in the context of this active apostolicity that we can see most clearly how the linearity we looked at in the first part of this chapter, and the sociality we looked at in the second, are linked. To hear Christ's word is to encounter a call to performance in which the salvation of our souls is worked out. To perform Christ's will is necessarily to find oneself in the company, as well as in the service, of others.

Von Balthasar thinks that what he titles the theo-drama is a real set of events – the *most* real events in history; the events on which history hangs. He thinks that in the Cross, which is the heart of this theo-drama, is a *real work*. It is not just an illustration of God's judgement and love; it is not fully described if described only

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63 Above all in my book *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

64 Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 17.

65 Von Balthasar, *Explorations I*, 238.

as 'revelation' (though it is that). Something momentous is achieved by it, and by the resurrection that follows it. It changes things. And it faces us with an unavoidable call to response, in company with others, that is the most important act we will ever undertake.