

## *Reviews*

### **A VERY CRITICAL RESPONSE TO KAREN KILBY: On Failing to See the Form**

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*A (Very) Critical Introduction to Balthasar.* By Karen Kilby. Grand Rapids, MI:  
Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012, xii + 176pp.

**K**aren Kilby complains at the beginning of her recent introduction to the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar that, unlike most theologians, he does not give critics a “useful target” that would allow one to get a handle on his work: “In Balthasar there is no such handle—no central or even apparently central methodological statement, no acknowledged allegiance to a particular philosophical thinker or school, and no one point where it is easy to say, if he is wrong here, something is wrong about the whole business.”<sup>2</sup> In a 1976 interview published not so long ago in *Communio*,<sup>3</sup> Balthasar was asked

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<sup>2</sup> Karen Kilby, *A (Very) Critical Introduction to Balthasar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Albus, “Spirit and Fire: An Interview with Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Communio* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 573-93. Kilby restricts herself to the English translations of Balthasar, and exclusively to the secondary literature on Balthasar in English, presumably because of the

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whether his theology does have a founding center, a methodological point that guides his work as a whole and so gives it its defining character. In response to a question concerning his difference from Karl Rahner, with whom he has often been associated, he offers an observation that is quite useful for anyone who would wish to understand what he is about. While he and Rahner had initially contemplated working on a joint project, it became evident to them that their “starting-points were always different. There is a book by Simmel which is called *Kant and Goethe*. Rahner has chosen Kant, or if you will, Fichte, the transcendental approach. And I have chosen Goethe, my field being German literature.”<sup>4</sup> As he goes on to explain, the key to his approach is the notion of *Gestalt*, “the indissolubly unique, organic developing form.” It is this key, we shall see, that unlocks the connections between the various dimensions of his exceedingly rich theology. Because Kilby fails to grasp the essential nature of form, and for that reason fails to see how the “panels” of the “trypich” of Balthasar’s *Trilogy* are intrinsically related, her criticisms miss their mark at every point. “If she is wrong here,” we might say, “something is wrong about the whole business.” Rather than respond point by point to her various criticisms, we will simply discuss this central issue and suggest how it leads Kilby to misinterpret the three joints of the trilogy. Then, we will indicate how the notion of form explains Balthasar’s style—contrary to Kilby’s most basic charge of his exhibiting a “performative contradiction.” Finally, we will conclude with a few observations about what seem to be Kilby’s own presuppositions about the nature of knowledge and truth, which compromise her capacity to offer valuable criticism. The reason for this brief essay is not primarily to criticize Kilby, but to take the

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overwhelming amount that has been written in other languages, but one would have expected her at least to consult a relatively brief interview with Balthasar in which Balthasar gives his own account of his general approach, since this interview has indeed appeared in English translation.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 579.

occasion to try to characterize in a succinct way at least a basic aspect of Balthasar's way of doing theology, which may seem so foreign in the context of the contemporary academy.

The heart of Kilby's critique of Balthasar is that the form of his work contradicts the content of his theology, in two essentially related ways. On the one hand, while he emphasizes the mystery of revelation and its surpassing of all human attempts to comprehend it, in his accounts he soars above all of the sources of theology—scripture, tradition, and the work of other theologians—and so gives himself what amounts to the perspective of an omniscient narrator. He *says* that there is an abiding mystery, in other words, but he *thinks* and *writes* as if there isn't. Perhaps more directly still, Balthasar aims to develop his theology in the mode of drama, which is meant to integrate the subjective/personal dimension (lyric: spirituality) and the objective/theoretical dimension (epic: theology). According to Balthasar, God's Word is not merely spoken to, but *sent into* the world, and this divine action requires a responsive action on the part of man. There is no neutral place to stand outside of this "Theo-drama"; any would-be spectator will inevitably find himself called into the play as a co-actor (*Mitspieler*). And yet, Kilby argues, the perspective that Balthasar apparently takes in describing this drama belies the claim that there is no place outside on which to stand. Apart from the one apparent exception of his book insisting on retaining a (non-presumptuous) hope for universal salvation, Balthasar always seems to "know too much" about whatever it is he treats. Rather than being *in* the undecidability of dramatic interaction, he seems always to place himself above it all. Thus, as Kilby explains, the problem with Balthasar's theology is quite subtle, but pervasive: what is objectionable is not a matter of the content of any particular theological idea so much as it is the form of his theology, the approach he takes. She concludes that there is something therefore especially

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dangerous about Balthasar, and worries about his growing influence. The aim of her book is thus to counteract that influence.

To determine whether Balthasar is in fact caught in a “performative contradiction,” of course, first requires that we come to terms with what Balthasar himself understands by the ideas he presents. This means we must orient ourselves by his basic presuppositions. One of the most fundamental of those presuppositions, which underlies and informs every part of his thinking, is that the transcendentals are inseparable. Balthasar gives this traditional axiom a rather strong interpretation: in his theology, it means, for example, that beauty is essentially dramatic because of the intrinsic presence of the good, that truth is essentially aesthetic, that goodness is essentially “veridic,” *i.e.*, manifestive of truth, and so forth. All of these dimensions are at play in form. The notion of form that Balthasar identifies as the unifying center of his thought therefore does not belong exclusively in the sphere of aesthetics, but runs through all of his work; the form unfolds a different aspect of its endlessly rich significance according to each particular order (aesthetics, drama, logic), but each depends on the others for its proper meaning. Kilby, however, interprets aesthetic form as separate from goodness and truth, she interprets drama as separate from beauty and truth, and—mostly by implication here because she never explicitly raises the question of the truth, for significant reasons, as we will see—she interprets truth as separate from beauty and goodness. As a result, the effigy of Balthasar’s theology comes to appear as something ugly, evil, and false, and so, if nothing else, at least perfectly adequate to the criticism Kilby intends to make of it. Let us look at each of these dimensions in more detail.

The key to Balthasar’s notion of form, when it is interpreted within the context of the circumincession of the transcendentals, is its paradoxical unity of opposites: form and splendor, subject and object, immanence and transcendence, time and eternity, surprise and fulfillment, freedom and obedience, manifestation

and hiddenness, and so forth. We cannot enter into a full discussion of any of these in the present context, of course, but there is a fundamental point that bears immediately on Kilby's assessments. For Balthasar, a form—*Gestalt*—is a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Genuinely to perceive a form, then, is to move beyond not only any of the identifiable parts of a thing in particular, but indeed all of them together. There is a crucial paradox here: it is one and the same thing, as it were, that gathers the various aspects of a thing together into a whole and simultaneously opens that whole up as luminous—that is, as an inbreaking of transcendence. This is why the (immanent) order of beautiful form and the transcendence of its splendor cannot be separated, and so why the vision of form (a grasp of the definitive wholeness) coincides with rapture (a being carried out “beyond” oneself). It is also why the dramatic action that occurs in response to the perception of form is able to take place, so to speak, *inside* that form, and why this action ultimately acquires the shape of a definitive commitment of freedom (rather than disconnected reactions to one set of circumstances after another). And, finally, it is why the understanding of the truth of God is not primarily a subjective appropriation of some concept, however vast, but even more basically a fruitful and fulfilling *ex-propriation* of the knower in the Spirit and into the form of Christ.

Kilby is right to identify the notion of form as lying at the center of Balthasar's aesthetics, but wrong to think it belongs only there. What is distinctive about the aesthetics is not form *per se*, but the *perception* of form. Kilby's failure to see this leads her both to isolate the aesthetic in a manner that radically distorts it, and then to miss the essential presence of form in drama (not to mention in logic, but in fact she does not address this aspect of Balthasar's theology in her book). Her distortion of aesthetic form becomes evident in several ways. First of all, Kilby asserts that the vision of form in Balthasar “transfixes” the beholder, whereas the

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crucial word for Balthasar is “enraptures.”<sup>5</sup> (Her overlooking the importance of this point is perhaps why she is able to make the very odd claim that “eros” has no place in Balthasar’s theology.<sup>6</sup>) To transfix is to paralyze; to enrapture, by contrast, is to carry away, to provoke, to attract in a manner that ignites one’s internal energies, and so to bring one *truly* outside oneself—*i.e.*, to initiate the drama. Second, Kilby repeatedly *opposes* aesthetic form to truth. For example, “Theology then [*i.e.*, when conceived aesthetically in Balthasar’s sense] becomes focused, not on examining or expressing the *truths* of revelation, or on bringing out its coherence, or illuminating its meaningfulness, but instead on expressing and examining the *beauty* of revelation.”<sup>7</sup> Form, for her, concerns beauty *rather than* meaning. It is thus separated from all content (*i.e.*, it is form conceived “formalistically”). Indeed, Kilby herself enacts what she criticizes by setting aside at every turn what she calls the “substance” of Balthasar’s ideas and attending simply to their form, or style, looking for patterns that she then can evaluate on their own. As a result of its separation from goodness and beauty, form gets, as it were, “sentimentalized”; it becomes, one might say, an inner feeling that has no purchase on reality and cannot be verified. Instead, the presumption becomes that form can only be arbitrarily asserted, and so imposed from the outside. Note, there is no real “rapture” (apart from an excited feeling, perhaps) possible in this case because there is no substantial form *into which* one could be moved.

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<sup>5</sup> This “transfixation” is indeed for Kilby the governing theme of Balthasar’s aesthetics. The title she gives to the section in which she presents this aesthetics is “Transfixed: Seeing the Form” (Kilby, 42). If she had written instead, “Enraptured: Seeing the Form,” one notes immediately how different the note struck would sound—and how much more faithful this alternate view would be to Balthasar’s own understanding.

<sup>6</sup> Consider for example his positive judgment, at the outset of the trilogy, of Dionysius’ privileging of the term ἔρωσ over ἀγάπη (*Glory of the Lord*, volume 1: *Seeing the Form* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982], 121-23, and his comment on the liturgical text from the Christmas Preface, which he presents as a paradigm of the phenomenon of “seeing the form,” as he understands it: “There is a good reason why the word used is *amor* (ἔρωσ) and not *caritas*” (ibid., 121).

<sup>7</sup> Kilby, 48.

If one takes such a notion for granted at the outset, as Kilby does, then talk of form can never be anything but authoritarian self-assertion. The horizon that she imposes on theology, against which alone Balthasar's ideas are allowed to appear, is that of political positioning, which is why she never once asks whether an idea she is considering might be true, but instead relentlessly asks only one sort of question: Who is *he* to say such things? By what authority? How does *he* know? And so on.

There are two important implications of Balthasar's notion of aesthetic form, properly interpreted, in this context. On the one hand, it means that a beautiful form cannot be grasped piecemeal, but necessarily has an "all at once" character to it (as has always been recognized, from Plato and Aristotle to modern thinkers). Kilby mentions this feature of form, but seems to forget the significance of this point when she goes on to complain that Balthasar's problem is that he does not allow a gradual, fragmented grasp of form. To insist on a piecemeal construction of a form is in fact to deny that there is such a thing as form at all, or at the very least to deny that form is graspable *simply*. One may, of course, approach a form in some sense by stages; however, these stages are not fragments that one then assembles, but initial intimations of the whole *qua* whole, all of which get recast with every deeper insight. This does not at all mean, however, as Kilby seems to believe, that the "all at once" character of the perception, once achieved, implies there is nothing "more" left to perceive. Quite to the contrary. This brings us to the second implication: precisely *because* the form is a whole greater than the sum of its parts, a grasp of its "all at once" character is at the very same time an awareness of its "excess," and so a precondition, as it were, for a sense of its mystery. It is only *because* one has had a definitive insight into a form that one realizes it would be possible to write volumes upon volumes and never say everything that could be said; one could translate and publish and receive dictation from others unceasingly, one could

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spend a good deal of one's writing illuminating the work of others who also, from different perspectives, glimpsed the form, and know that the form has become only more mysterious through it all.

Kilby seems to think that a person without insight, or with only partial, fragmentary grasps of a thing, is in the best position to preserve a sense of its excessive mystery. But is this true? It seems rather to be the case that one cannot even have a sense of the partiality of a perspective *unless* one has a grasp of the whole of which one's perspective is a part—which means, as we will propose at the end, that Kilby's "epistemic humility" turns out in spite of itself to be far more immodest, and (what is most problematic for one who would wish to enter into dialogue with her) incorrigibly so by its very nature. If Kilby were correct, one would have to say that a person who is ignorant of poetry, for example, one who knows nothing about a particular author, and indeed who can make out only a word or two here or there in the poem because it is written perhaps in an unfamiliar language, will necessarily have a greater sense of the inexhaustible meaning of the poem, indeed will more likely never run out of things to say about it, than someone who has a profound insight into the poem and can see how all the strange and surprising images fit—miraculously—together. Or to take Kilby's own example: it is only the person sitting so close to the drums at a concert he couldn't manage to hear anything else, and so could only "suppose" that there was in fact a symphony going on, who would best appreciate the excessive mystery of the music being played.<sup>8</sup> It is hard to imagine how such a suggestion could be plausible to anyone other than a person who can't get the tunes of postmodern thinking out of his or her head. Clearly, one whose hearing is eclipsed by the drums would have a sense of having missed something essential, of being powerless to attend to the symphony and thus to bring to

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<sup>8</sup> Kilby, 151.

mind the fullness of the music performed, but this is quite different from standing in awe of the music's mysterious depths.

Kilby's desire to preserve the mystery of revelation, the authority of scripture and tradition, the importance of dialogue with other thinkers, and so forth, is laudable. But her failure to grasp the nature of form turns this desire in a direction we would ultimately have to judge to be fruitless. For Balthasar, reality presents itself as form, which, as we have seen, means that the better one grasps it, the more evident its mystery becomes. Reality itself has a dimension of depth, which understanding works to make manifest. Kilby's rejection of form or its accessibility implies, by contrast, that reality is essentially *flat* to the extent that it enters into our vision. In this case, one can preserve mystery, not by entering more deeply, more centrally, into reality, but rather only by holding oneself back or keeping to the edges—remaining, so to speak, next to the drums, even if better seats were available. In this case, mystery becomes something negative, and due primarily to subjective disposition. It is no longer convertible with truth in what Balthasar calls the objective “miracle” of being, but instead coincides simply with ignorance or non-knowing. Contrary to her intentions, no doubt, Kilby nevertheless deprives God and the world of mystery because the “darkness” that would otherwise be caused by the overfull light of the depths comes about, for her, only if we succeed in reminding ourselves, perhaps out of good intentions, to shut our eyes. The irony is that this sort of “modesty” in fact makes the self the arbiter, the granter of mystery.

Just as Kilby separates beauty from goodness and truth, she also separates goodness from beauty and truth—in other words, she treats drama as if it had nothing to do with form.<sup>9</sup> For Kilby, the essential feature of drama is open-

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<sup>9</sup>John Milbank has recently challenged the view that we are presenting here, namely, that, for Balthasar, drama is a matter of form and so remains in essential continuity with the aesthetic—and of course eventually also with the realm of truth. In the second edition of *The Suspended*

endedness and undecidability. She thus claims that the only place where Balthasar's theological style does justice to its content is in the book *Dare We Hope*, in which Balthasar resolutely guards against presumption about "how things will turn out," as it were. To be sure, the notion of "surprise" is a central one for Balthasar, and is crucial to his notion of drama. But it is only in superficial instances of drama that surprise is essentially connected with subjective ignorance. To be prematurely informed "whodunnit" during a B-grade detective show is to lose interest in the program altogether. But we all already know the culprit in *Macbeth*, and yet it remains dramatic for us every time we see it well-performed. Kilby explains that a dramatic theologian would be "one who is caught up, in the midst of things, and who cannot claim to have read or to have a grasp of the whole script in advance."<sup>10</sup> Is it really the case that an actor who has never read a script, or who is only fed one line at a time, would be better able to enter into a drama than one who had read and re-read a script, and

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*Middle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), Milbank makes the provocative claim that Balthasar ultimately leaves form behind in his transition to the theo-dramatic theory. We see evidence of this, Milbank explains, in "the Preface to the *Theodrama*, where Balthasar speaks of an action that lies beyond 'form' and the contemplable—to which the riposte must be, how can there be an action at all, especially an action upon something, which does not in some sense appear and which is not regardable (whether or not it is 'comprehensible')?" (Ibid., 77). Milbank confesses that his claim will be one "at which many will protest," and indeed the many will turn out to have good reason: the very text Milbank cites here to support his provocative claim says the precise opposite of what he imputes to it. Balthasar raises, here, the possible objection that the divine drama is somehow "invisible" or non-appearing, not as an expression of his own thesis, but as a challenge to his entire project, which is the reason he takes such pains to show why it is untrue. As he explains quite plainly in the preface, drama does not go beyond *form*, as Milbank supposes, but only beyond passive, detached *spectation* of form, which is why drama "expands aesthetics into something new," even while aesthetics remains in this expansion "yet continuous with itself" (*Theo-Drama*, volume one: *Prolegomena* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988], 17). Love is not in the least "beyond form" for Balthasar. In fact, one could say that the contrary affirmation represents a particularly succinct summation of his theology as a whole. For a clear presentation of this, see his book *Love Alone Is Credible*, especially chapter nine, which is entitled "Love as Form."

<sup>10</sup> Kilby, 63.

lived with it for months?<sup>11</sup> Again, it is hard to see how any one would think this is the case, outside, perhaps, of certain streams in the contemporary academy. According to Kilby's understanding, one cannot have true drama without a certain formlessness and incompleteness, and she takes for granted that Balthasar shares her understanding of the nature of drama without attempting to ascertain whether this is the case. In fact, one cannot understand drama as Balthasar does without coming to terms with his notion of form. Just as aesthetic form is a coincidence of form and splendor, so too is drama a form in which the openness of surprise coincides with the closure of insight, resolution, and definitive action. Balthasar points to God's inner life as the *Urdrama*. For Kilby, this would have to mean either that Balthasar thinks of the Trinitarian relations as reflecting a paradigmatic undecidability and incompleteness, or that he simply does not know what he is saying. In other words, he is either shockingly heretical or shockingly confused about his own theology. We might agree with Kilby that there is some confusion here, but we suggest it does not in fact belong to Balthasar.

For Balthasar, the essence of drama lies in the reciprocal dependence of apparently opposed movements, and thus an irreducible tension that comes to light only with a grasp of their unity in the whole. It is only such a view of drama that explains why Balthasar can describe God's inner life as the proto-drama. The ancient Greeks, the "inventors" of the genre, based their plays on myths already well-known to the audience, and would sometimes recount the essential plot as a prelude to the play in order that ignorance about the ending not distract the audience from the drama of the action. The action in Greek drama,

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<sup>11</sup> The infamous Broadway show from 2011, "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark," apparently went through a record 183 dress rehearsals, in part because the script was constantly being re-written by a group of writers in response to audience reactions. The actors, thus, received new lines at every rehearsal. The question is, does this represent a paradigm of drama, or a failure of drama?

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then, primarily consists, not in presenting a surprise-ending, but in gradually laying bare, layer by layer, the profound tensions that constitute human existence. The most essential surprise of drama, we might say, comes from the “vertical” depth rather than the “horizontal” undecidability, which is why it is coincident with the perfection of form. Thus, a “dramatic theology,” understood in Balthasar’s rather than in Kilby’s sense, is one that aims to bring to light the irreducible tensions of the life of the world inside of the life of God. But the only way to show forth tensions is to exhibit the encompassing whole that they bring about, and indeed the whole that allows them in fact to be tensions. Disjointed fragments carry no tension because they lack any internal unity to each other, which means that incompleteness as such is undramatic. This point perhaps sets into clearest relief the difference between Balthasar and Kilby. If it is true, then it follows that one will better be able to bring out dramatic tension the more adequately one succeeds in bringing the whole to light. It is therefore *precisely* a sense of drama (and not the betrayal of such a sense) that would drive one to seek as full and as comprehensive an account as possible. When Balthasar says that the theologian cannot stand outside of the drama, what he most fundamentally means is not that he does not know what he is talking about (in which case it would be presumptuous indeed to publish one’s writing). Rather, he means that the theologian does his thinking *inside* the glorious (*herrliche*) form that has laid claim to him—*i.e.*, he thinks as a believer that belongs to Christ, rather than as a neutral scholar. Christian thought thus has an obligation to this form. The effort to display the meaningful form that brings out the tensions of existence is dramatic because it is bound in obedience to something greater than itself. Because of the essentially dramatic nature of form, as Balthasar understands it, to the extent that one’s writing succeeds in bringing it to expression, one’s writing will itself take on that quality—it will reflect the light of the form that, in turn, calls the reader to decision and action. If Balthasar leaves

the question of universal salvation open in *Dare We Hope*, it is not because he happens to remember himself only in this one instance, as Kilby supposes, but because the outcome of the freedom of individuals in history is of a different order than the issue, for example, of the soteriological nature of the incarnation. And it is only a grasp of the *form* of the drama of the incarnation that allows us to remain open in theological hope to the outcome of individual human freedom.

The primary characteristic of a dramatic theology, in short, is that it strives to find the center that gives life to all the parts, rather than in the first place marshaling narrowly framed arguments for or against one or another of these parts in isolation from the rest. In other words, a dramatic theology will exhibit precisely those features that Kilby identifies as evidence of the *lack of drama*. Balthasar's style is no "performative contradiction": it is in harmony with his understanding of drama, and it contradicts only Kilby's own (essentially postmodern) concept.<sup>12</sup>

We have mentioned beauty and goodness so far. As for truth, we have said that Kilby does not seem very concerned with it in this book; she makes virtually no reference to the final part of Balthasar's trilogy (apart from, in one place, expressing astonishment at how many different authors are mentioned in one of the sections). It should be evident that, once again because of his paradoxical sense of the nature of form, for Balthasar, the definitiveness of truth is not only compatible with, but is in a certain respect an indispensable condition for, the openness of mystery. We will not belabor this point, except to indicate that it implies a "non-possessive" notion of knowledge in which the certainty of one's

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<sup>12</sup> Kilby draws her notion of drama, and the critique she makes of Balthasar based on it, primarily from Ben Quash (see Kilby, 64-65). Quash, for his part, gets his notion of drama, not from Balthasar, but from Foucault. For a discussion of the inadequacies of such an approach, see my *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2004), 21-25.

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grasp of a thing coincides with one's respect for its abiding otherness. Running through the whole of Kilby's discussion, by contrast, is what we could say is a modern, liberal assumption that these dimensions are essentially opposed. According to this assumption, one threatens the freedom of others precisely to the extent that one makes a truth claim, regardless of the content of that truth; in order to ensure respect for others, one needs to loosen one's grasp on truth. But of course the irony is that this assumption makes truth and knowledge oppressive by nature. They appear to be so because they ultimately reduce, as we saw above, to authoritarian self-assertion. And this follows because one has interpreted form in an essentially subjectivistic way. The only way to avoid oppression and domination, given this interpretation, is to limit knowledge, or—as Gianni Vattimo has “argued”—to practice self-irony regarding truth claims. When Kilby explicitly sets aside all consideration of substance, *i.e.*, any engagement with a truth claim as a truth claim, in her discussion of Balthasar, she is in effect determining *a priori* that his presentation of form in the matter at hand is *essentially not* an articulation of the reality of a thing, of the matter as it in fact is. Instead, it can only be an imposition. Knowledge is domination; to avoid domination, one must limit knowledge and truth claims. Thus, when Balthasar attempts to give an account of the whole, to articulate a truth that would illuminate the ways various things are related to one another, given the terms she has set (without argument), Kilby can only understand this as Balthasar's “silently positioning” himself so that he has control. Theology, apparently, is all about power relations, so that if one is not giving power, one is taking it. What one is never doing is enjoying community in the truth. But is it possible finally to enjoy community in any other way?

If one does not accept the tired “hermeneutics of suspicion” that Kilby apparently presupposes here, one can make much more obvious and compelling sense of all of the time Balthasar spends—more than perhaps any other author in

our age—elucidating the thought of others rather than simply laying out his own. If he has the “God’s eye view,” as Kilby characterizes it, what point would there be in going to such lengths at every turn to present others’ insights? Rather than assuming that this is simply an exhibition of his erudition and mastery, one ought to consider the possibility Balthasar thinks that these authors say something indispensable, both to him and to all of us, something that has perhaps been overlooked. One of the things that attracts people so fervently to Balthasar is precisely the fact that his theology enkindles a love for the tradition and implants a desire to get to know the Church’s great saints and theologians better.<sup>13</sup> Balthasar does indeed attempt to present the whole whenever he writes, but a whole is not oppressive of its parts (how could it be?); if it is a proper whole, it liberates them all to be what they are, it brings to light their uniqueness. There is no opposition, in principle, between truth claims and freedom. If a truth claim in fact enslaves, that is evidence that it is false or incomplete, but because the claim deliberately aims at truth there are grounds in this case for correcting it.

One of the ways Kilby characterizes the problem she sees in Balthasar is by saying he is essentially an “unfettered” theologian, who worked essentially in isolation and so without the natural restraints that occur in one’s thinking when one is beholden to the standards of a press or editorial board, and when one is surrounded by colleagues working in different areas and possessing different backgrounds.<sup>14</sup> But Kilby has clearly not been to visit the archives in Basel, where decades have been spent trying to bring order and accessibility to the *mountains* of substantial correspondence Balthasar wrote in his lifetime. Rather than being narrowly obsessed with his own writing, Balthasar occupied the first

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the “testimonies” presented in *How Balthasar Changed My Mind*, ed. Larry Chapp and Rodney Howsare (New York: Crossroad, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> See Kilby, 38-40.

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hours of every day—the most important time for work—with the task of writing letters and responding to requests from others, whether those were famous theologians or first-year graduate students. The “colleagues” with whom he discussed not just his work but the problems facing the Church and the world, the great figures of literature and art, and the central questions of philosophy and theology, were some of the greatest minds and spirits of his time. The notion of truth as fruitfulness grew not only out of his long study of the tradition, but also out of his constant dialogue with others.

In the last pages of her book, Kilby attempts to show her fairness and raises a striking question: “Might there not be, it could be asked, underlying the criticisms I have been raising, something very like a modern anxiety toward wholeness, a refusal to countenance even its possibility?”<sup>15</sup> The question ignites one’s hope that she will reflect on the guiding presuppositions that have gone without explanation or argument, and perhaps try to justify them. But one’s hopes are disappointed; she doesn’t answer the question, or even make an attempt. Instead, she simply articulates yet another repetition of her complaint that Balthasar is oppressive because his theology is founded on a “symphonic” conception of truth. Because this is what she writes in response to the question she raises, one can only interpret her as “performing” the answer that she fails to give explicitly. That answer is “Yes.”

Let us, in closing, consider the difference between these two approaches to reality in relation to the question of what Kilby calls “epistemic humility.” One of the epigraphs of *The Glory of the Lord*, volume IV, is a verse from Goethe: “Whoever cannot give account / Of three thousand years, / Let him remain in darkness, unlearned, / And live from day to day.” Balthasar is here taking the principle of “seeing the form,” not as a presumption (the Kantian *a priori*, we

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 149.

recall, was Rahner's foundation), but fundamentally a *task*. Balthasar feels an *obligation* to account for the whole as adequately as possible because of the claim that the whole makes on him (this is the essence of beauty). It is an essentially other-centered approach, and in this sense it is a fundamental expression of "epistemic humility." Only a truth claim, as we indicated above, can be corrected, because only one who claims truth can be claimed *by* truth. Balthasar's approach is by its very nature and intention open to criticism *precisely because* it is an attempt to see the whole. Criticism of Balthasar, in this respect, is important; indeed, for Catholic (and catholic) thinkers it is indispensable: where his vision is too narrow, where he fails to account for some aspect of reality, of scripture, of the tradition, that is essential, where he exaggerates or oversimplifies, is essential to point out, and one does a service to his thought to make whatever shortcomings it betrays known. Balthasar's reading of other thinkers demonstrates just this disposition. He attempts first of all to articulate the center of the person's thought as generously and as carefully as he can, and only then to offer criticism. Indeed, his method is even more "Ignatian," in that he is best described as entering into the other's thought so that the other is enabled to bring himself, as it were, to judgment. But Kilby shows no such disposition, at least in the reading of Balthasar she offers here. As we observed above, she does not evaluate any of the substance of Balthasar's thought or seek to discern whether what he says might be true. Indeed, she does not even attempt to make any of the substance evident. The question that she raises at the very outset of the book—which, we ought to recall, she presents as an *introduction* to his thought—is not, "What is the fundamental aim of Balthasar's theology?" Or, "How do the parts of his thought fit together?" Instead, she asks—as the "entry" question (!) to orient her discussion—"How can one, then, *catch hold of* Balthasar well enough in order to be able to criticize him?"<sup>16</sup> Does one, we are prompted

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 (italics are Kilby's).

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to ask in return, most properly *begin* an assessment of an author in the mode of epistemic humility by finding the best way to get him in one's "grips" so that one may most effectively criticize him?

It would be tempting to say that Kilby is presenting here a "performative contradiction," but on second thought this is not true. In fact, the method follows from her assumptions about the nature of things. If one takes for granted *a priori* that the form of things, of ideas, of thinkers, may perhaps be there but lies outside of any capacity to see it, one is saying in effect that there is no obligation to look for it. One is saying, in other words, that partial perspectives, because they are unsurpassable, are effectively absolute. Kilby quite evidently feels no obligation to find the center of Balthasar's thought, in order to be able to judge it. Indeed, she apparently feels no obligation to read any secondary literature that might help to present the center—and so perhaps challenge her own reading—but only the authors who already agree with her judgments (apart from general references to a few positive overviews of Balthasar's oeuvre at the very outset of the book, there is scarcely a single substantial reference in the footnotes to anything in the secondary literature that is not directly critical.)<sup>17</sup> She in fact makes no effort to enter into it and consider, empathetically, what he is trying to say and weigh its relative truth. One will note, if one rereads her text with this in mind, that Kilby does not say a *single* positive thing about Balthasar in the entire book that she does not immediately substantially qualify or simply undercut—if not in the very next sentence, at least in the very next paragraph.

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<sup>17</sup> It is perhaps worth pointing out that this present critique of Kilby's book was originally written in response to an invitation to contribute an "afterword" to be published along with her text, since there was concern her text was so one-sidedly critical. But Kilby refused to allow it. There is an irony that an author who so strongly criticizes a theologian for allegedly seeking to hold the master perspective in a conversation would herself deny a hearing for a view "from the other side," so to speak. The point in mentioning this is not to make an *ad hominem* argument, but simply to show that the insistence on "allowing the other to speak," no matter how sincerely meant, is almost inevitably contradictory in fact, and typically coincides with a willingness to exclude out of hand a genuinely different perspective.

The approbation she gives to *Dare We Hope*, significantly, comes in an *appendix*. While Kilby's emphasis on partiality might seem to give space to the other, her treatment of Balthasar's theology reveals the real implications of her assumptions: precisely because a detachment from the whole makes the fragment absolute in itself, one cannot help but impose one's own views on another, and measure the other by those views in a manner that allows no appeal.

Balthasar's thought, founded on the notion of form, seeks the *center* of things out of a desire to get to the heart of the matter. And this desire has the structure of humility, because it is set on something larger than the self. He seeks the center of Christianity—to display the form of Christ—and he seeks the center of the various thinkers he engages, even and especially the ones he seeks to criticize. Clearly, one cannot offer valuable criticism except of that which one has understood. Kilby rejects *a priori* the availability of a center, which means she simply relieves herself of any responsibility for trying to find it. She makes no effort to see the center of Balthasar's thought, but contents herself with “partiality” and “fragments,” and more or less ad hominem potshots that arise from a selective reading. A person wishes to learn something from a good criticism, which is why it is not in principle a contradiction to write a “very critical introduction,” *i.e.*, an effort to present a thinker to one unfamiliar with him or her that is coupled with a judgment on that thinker. But one learns virtually nothing substantial about Balthasar from this book. Kilby does not reject the study of Balthasar altogether, but her final judgment of this thinker is quite damning: “the one thing in my view one ought *not* to learn from him is how to be a theologian.”<sup>18</sup> Her own book may have been a better introduction to Balthasar's theology if she had attempted to learn from him, if not how to

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<sup>18</sup> Kilby, 167.

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approach the great Christian mysteries with a humble and faithful intelligence, then at least how to be a proper critic.