THE *ANTLITZ* OF BEATRICE: DANTEAN THEODRAMATICS IN BALTHASAR'S MARIAN ECCLESIOLOGY

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"A woman's *Antlitz* reveals the inner theodramatic mystery of the feminine, and thereby the face of the Marian Church."

In May of 1283, on a Florentine *vicolo*, Dante Alighieri encountered Beatrice Portinari and announced: "incipit vita nuova" (here begins a new life).[1] He had first seen her nine years prior, but this time she addressed him. As he described it: "While walking down a street, she turned her eyes to where I was standing faint-hearted and, with that indescribable graciousness. . . . she greeted me so miraculously that I felt I was experiencing the very summit of bliss."[2] In time, this experience would poetically

1. See Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (Berkeley: Apocryphile Press, 2016), 18.

2. Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, trans. Mark Musa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6.

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mature into the "master-image" of his *Divine Comedy*.[3] While remaining "a real and beloved woman," Beatrice becomes for Dante "a symbol of all creation glorified by love."[4] Her allegorical significance does not diminish the existential force of Dante's overwhelming personal experience of her. In fact, it does the opposite: as dramatized metaphor, Beatrice opens up the world in universal form. She is the paragon of earthly beauty, but she is more: as beauty elevated in the order of grace, she becomes "the God-bearing image" that Dante will gradually come to understand.[5] If the entire journey of the *Divine Comedy* is an allegory of the Way to God, then the encounter with the master-image is a sight of "Heaven's glory walking the earth bodily."[6]

After seven centuries, Dante remains a preeminent expositor of how feminine beauty reveals the mystery of the living God. More recently, Pope John Paul II invited a similar reflection from the vantage point of Mariology:

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3. Dorothy Sayers, *Introductory Papers on Dante* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), xv:

> One image, although not private, is a personal one, and that is the master-image of Beatrice, which he himself made public in the *Vita Nuova*. His life and work are centered in that overwhelming personal experience by which the Love that made and moves the worlds was mediated to him through the grace and beauty of an actual living woman.

4. Ibid., 8. Again: "The important thing is to avoid defining her too narrowly, in either her literal or her allegorical meaning. Perhaps the most comprehensive thing one might say concerning Beatrice is that she is for Dante the embodiment of his experience of love." Dorothy Sayers, "Introduction," in *Paradiso*, by Dante Alighieri, trans. Dorothy Sayers and Barbara Reynolds (London: Penguin Books, 1962), 50.

5. Sayers, *Introductory Papers*, 56:

> Long ago, in a dream, Love—the Lord of terrible aspect whom he had first encountered in the God-bearing image of Beatrice—had said to him "I am the center of the circle, to whom all parts of the circle are similarly related: but with thee it is not so." Dante had not then understood this; now he does. Now all parts of his circumference move equally about that central Love of which his first love was the image and the promise. The first love is not denied by the last love; all forms are taken up and integrated into that.

6. Dorothy Sayers, "The Greater Images," in *Inferno*, by Dante Alighieri, trans. Dorothy Sayers (London: Penguin Books, 1950), 67.

> In the light of Mary, the Church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement.[7]

This vision of John Paul II elevated the post-conciliar Church out of the preoccupation with praxis, i.e. the endless discussion around the role of women in the Church. In a similar fashion, Hans Urs von Balthasar had the intuition to return to deeper originating waters and to theologically repropose the question. As he writes: "It is impossible to focus on the theodramatic roles unless, right from the start, we also bring out their inner dramatic potential."[8]

If we are to realize this vision, that the face of a woman expresses the beauty of the Marian Church, then we must explore the theodramatic mystery of the feminine. To do so, we will take up the Church's loftiest poetic expression: Dante Alighieri's Beatrice. In the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar, her beauty is expounded within the inner dynamic unity of eros and agape. This provides the landscape of the story that unfolds. What we hope to contribute is a theodramatic deployment of Beatrice, under the auspices of the Balthasarian notion of *Antlitz*.

More than any other feature of the master-image of Beatrice, Dante is captivated by her eyes.[9] As he writes in the *Vita nuova*: "From out of her eyes, wherever they may move / come

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7. *Redemptoris mater*, 46.

8. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 3, *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 291.

9. See Mark Sandoval, "Look Up: The Eyes of Dante and Giotto," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 21 (Fall 2018): 41–42:

> Dante describes Beatrice's eyes as glowing (*ardea*; 3:24), smiling (*ridenti*; 3:42 and 10.62) and at one point the eyes of Beatrice glow with a smile (*ardeva un riso*; 15.34); they are filled with the sparks of love (*pieni di faville d'amor*; 4.139–40). This gaze into the beloved's eyes surely derives from the love poetry of Dante's day, from the *stilnovisti* and the troubadours. . . . Beatrice's eyes are not simply beautiful human eyes; they are a fiery miracle sent from God to save Dante from sin.

spirits that are all aflame with Love."[10] All throughout the Comedy, we hear Dante speaking of, reflecting upon, inspired by, or simply enthralled with the eyes of Beatrice.

More than the eyes, Dante is searching for the full countenance of Beatrice, which Balthasar calls her *Antlitz*. It is described in a variety of feminine features: her radiant face, piercing eyes, enveloping smile, penetrating glance, and even her audacious laugh. Drawn into unity as an *Antlitz*, one can rediscover the central feature of womanhood. For Dante, it was an experience that "heightened" his masculinity.[11] As Étienne Gilson describes:

> That which the beloved woman thus presented to Dante's gaze in the light of her face, the smile of her eyes, and the charm of her greeting, was—attuned to his sensibility through a mysterious affinity—the beauty of the flesh as signifying beauties of a more exalted kind. I believe that in the whole of Dante's work not a single case could be found in which the salutary intercession of Beatrice does not owe something of its efficacy to the sight or the memory of her bodily beauty.[12]

The hidden, driving force within the entire Odyssean journey of Dante is the bodily expression of a beautiful woman—distinctively beheld by Dante in her *Antlitz*. But why is this man looking for himself (and, in fact, for God) in the face of a woman?

A woman looks differently at a person. Hers is not just a look, but a responding gaze that, in receiving the other, expresses the mystery of answering fruitfulness. Exemplified in Beatrice, a woman's *Antlitz* reveals the inner theodramatic mystery of the feminine, and thereby the face of the Marian Church. Just as Dante "looks at the beloved [Beatrice] in order to glean and receive from her the meaning and form of existence," so, too, does

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See also Richard Pearce, "The Eyes of Beatrice," *The New Blackfriars* 54 (1973): 407–416.

10. Dante, *Vita Nuova,* 36.

11. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice,* 72.

12. Étienne Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952), 69.

the Christian look to the Church in Mary.[13] The following will explicate this thesis in three parts: after the preliminary remarks on the notion of person, *Antlitz,* and the interplay of aesthetics and dramatics (Part 1: The Geography of the Human Person), we will turn our attention to Balthasar's understanding of the role of Beatrice in Dante's aesthetics (Part 2: *L'amor che mi fa bella*: Dante's Aesthetics of Love). Lastly, we will theodramatically deploy the Balthasarian concept of *Antlitz* to Dante's master-image of Beatrice (Part 3: Beatrice as *Antlitz:* A Theodramatic Deployment). In the end, we hope to arrive at the summit of the Church's life in the countenance of Mary.

1. THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

1.1. Person as Prosopon

Our theodramatic employment must begin in Balthasar's understanding of theological personhood. The history of the concept of person has been thoroughly treated; our purpose is merely to view how its lexical emergence from the Greek word *prosopon* still carries deep insights into the mystery of the person.[14] In short, we want to attend to Balthasar's insistence on the "prosopographical" dimension of personhood if we are to draw out aspects of the "inner dramatic dimension of theological personhood."[15]

Though the originating context of the word *prosopon* is Greek tragedy, the Latin word *persona* is derived from the Etruscan *phersu*. Masks, worn at the festival honoring Persephone, communicated both the actor (the one wearing the mask), as well as their role (the assignment given in the play).[16] The wearing of

13. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 3, *Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles*, trans. Andrew Louth et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 62.

14. For a brief introduction, see Paul O'Callaghan, *Children of God in the World: An Introduction to Theological Anthropology,* trans. Michael J. Miller (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 554.

15. Balthasar*, Theo-Drama* 3*,* 267.

16. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "On the Concept of Person," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 20.

the "mask" communicated a person in a dramatic role. Within these roles unfolded the dialogue and interpersonal exchange of the dramatic artistic form. As the application of the term widened, a new interplay arose between the poetic-artistic expression of roles and their application in juridic and philosophical life. As Ratzinger describes: "The poet creates the artistic device of roles through which the action can be depicted in dialogue. The literary scholar uncovers these roles; he shows that the persons have been created as 'roles' in order to give dramatic life to events."[17] Early in the Christian theological tradition, the term was appropriated, and thus began a long and complex historical transition between the Greek and Latin lexicons. In the end, Balthasar concludes: "The Latin meaning of *persona* as a real spiritual subject (and not just as 'role') gains increasing importance in theology, as becomes evident especially in the later adoption of the trinitarian usage by Christology."[18]

As the concept of *persona* takes on theological form, its theatric dimension of "role" is contained within the transformational vision of Christianity.[19] In other words, the "prosopographical" remains within the "personalogical." Speaking from the Christian philosophical perspective, Kenneth Schmitz offers a fitting summary:

> In philosophical terms, the face displays the spiritual reality. . . . I have so far combined the Greek and Latin sense of *person* with the meaning of *face:* both terms indicate the manifestation of meaningful depth, the distinctiveness of the individual, the intimacy of direct personal encounter, and the dignity associated with the divine and with the specifically human.[20]

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17. Joseph Ratzinger, "Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 17, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 441.

18. Balthasar, "On the Concept of Person," 21.

19. See Balthasar, "On the Concept of Person," 21. See also Ángel Cordovilla Pérez, "The Trinitarian Concept of Person," in *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology*, ed. Giulio Maspero and Robert J. Woźniak (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 105–45.

20. Kenneth L. Schmitz, *The Texture of Being: Essays in First Philosophy,* ed. Paul O'Herron, Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 152.

There is something of enduring significance in the way that the face reveals the person. It is, as Schmitz describes, part of the "geography" of the human person.[21] We find ourselves always looking for the face of another, an innate draw to the locus of relational and spiritual connectivity. In the mind of Balthasar, this phenomenological dimension directs our attention back to the revelatory logic of God's self-disclosure. Theological personhood, flowing from the inner trinitarian life, takes historical form in the "acting area" of Jesus Christ.[22]

Here "created conscious subjects can become persons of theological relevance, co-actors in theo-drama."[23] When the God-given election, vocation, and mission are accepted by man, he steps onto the theological stage of Christ himself. This constitutes the "inner dramatic dimension of theological personhood": that by forgoing a privatized subjectivity, we are "functionalized" into mission.[24] Despite this de-privatization, man discovers himself in Christ, assuming his distinct role in the theodramatic acting area. Now the dramatic notions of "mask" and "role" are enveloped within the christological significance of conferred personhood, translated into election, vocation, and mission.

1.2. On the Concepts of Antwort *and* Antlitz

Our geographical survey of the human person thus far has established the enduring prosopographical significance of the person.

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21. Our section title "The Geography of the Human Person" is taken from a chapter title of Schmitz, *The Texture of Being,* 149–68.

22. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* 3, 271. This notion of a christological acting area is Balthasar's creative recasting of the Pauline ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ (1 Cor 15:22), an employment of theodramatic categories. For more on his vision of theological personhood, see ibid., 263–82.

23. Ibid., 263.

24. Ibid., 267. Speaking of a person as a "function" can strike us as a utilitarian reduction. Something is lost in the translation of Balthasar's original German. What is intended by function is the inner dynamic of mission contained within theological personhood, a movement catalyzed by communion in Christ. We must recall that the backdrop of this is his theology of the states of life; and the key for interpreting it, the bestowal of *Gestalt*. See, e.g., Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 221: "The grace of the Christian states is never granted except in the form of mission, in which is contained all the meaningfulness of this state."

As the emergent point of the spiritual center of the person, the meaningfulness of the human face must likewise express the dynamism of sexual complementarity. Reflecting on chastity, Erik Varden writes:

> "Man was created with two faces." Man and woman are intended to live face to face. They are to affirm each other's personhood in the relational, Greek sense of the word for person, *prosopon*, made up of *pros* (towards) and *ops* (eye). I am a person in so far as I meet the eye of another and the other's eye meets mine. As long as man could not see himself in the eyes of woman, he was but half a man.[25]

Along with Balthasar and Schmitz, Varden confirms the prosopographical significance of the person, this time in reference to sexual difference. We are now poised to engage the central question: what is most significant about the face of a woman? To answer this, Balthasar will first employ the sister concepts of *Antwort* and *Antlitz*. Concerning the former, he writes:

> Woman is essentially an answer (*Ant-Wort*), in the most fundamental sense of *ant*, which is common to all Indo-European languages, meaning "over-against" as in German *entgegen* (for example, Greek *anti*, Sanskrit *anti*, and so on); or "toward" (old Saxon, Old Norse, Gothic *and*); the word implies both "direction toward" and the counterpart to something. The German *Ende* [English *end*] is cognate insofar as, in Old High German (and so forth), it means "front," "forehead," "apex." If man is the word that calls out, woman is the answer that comes to him at last (in the *end*). The two are related to and ordered to each other.[26]

Woman, as *Antwort*, or responding word, is directionally significant; there is a kind of inner relational character to a response. A word can be spoken on its own; but only to a response can we ascribe relationship. Or, in the words of Balthasar: "The word that calls out only attains fulfillment when it is understood, accepted and given back as a word."[27] To recall Varden's earlier

25. Erik Varden, *Chastity: Reconciliation of the Senses* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2024), 64.

26. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* 3, 284.

27. Ibid., 284.

insight, we only become persons when "engaged in an ecstatic relationship; that is, in a relation that makes me step outside myself in exposure to alterity."[28] This can only occur within a sexually differentiated humanity, where the masculine and the feminine exist to draw this existential tension to the fore. "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gn 2:18), because he does not contain the answer to his call within himself. And this is precisely the meaning of woman.

Returning to our sister concepts, what *Antwort* denotes in the order of speech, *Antlitz* expresses in the order of sight. This too Balthasar ascribes to the beauty and significance of woman. As he writes:

> The phoneme *-litz* is cognate with the Anglo-Saxon *wlītan*, Old Norse *lita*, "see, look," and the corresponding *wlite*, "appearance, form." Words for "seer, poet" (cf. *veleda*) come from the same Indo-European root. Thus the "face" is what "faces" us, "looks toward" us. Man and woman are face to face. Here their equal rank is given even more emphasis: man looks around him and meets with an answering gaze that turns the one-who-sees into the one-who-is-seen.[29]

Though distinctively *Antlitz*, woman is equal to the "*litz*" of man, appearing in creation with the same metaphysical constitution. But she is likewise complementary: as one who is inherently directional, woman is uniquely postured "toward" another. This configures her look or glance in a distinctive manner. Standing face to face with man, it is the woman who provides man with the "answering gaze" he needs to find the completion of his own searching glance. The answering gaze of the feminine is not only a look; it transforms "the one-who-sees into the one-who-is-seen."[30] Man and woman, *Wort* and *Antwort*, "*litz*" and *Antlitz*, share unity and equality, and are created to image God in the intersubjective act of self-giving and receiving. But it all begins in the look—and the face that returns it.

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28. Varden, *Chastity,* 67.

29. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* 3, 285.

30. Ibid., 285.

1.3. The Interpenetration of Aesthetics and Dramatics

Before developing Balthasar's theodramatic vision of Beatrice, we must recall his understanding of the interplay between aesthetics and dramatics. Summarizing the first volume of *The Glory of the Lord*, he writes:

> If everything in the world that is fine and beautiful is *epiphaneia*, the radiance and splendor which breaks forth in expressive form from a veiled and yet mighty depth of being, then the event of the self-revelation of the hidden, the utterly free and sovereign God in the forms of this world, in word and history, and finally in the human form itself, will itself form an analogy to that worldly beauty however far it outstrips it.[31]

Because beauty is inherently epiphanic, aesthetics naturally unfold into dramatics. By epiphanic, Balthasar first means that the transcendentals of created being are revelatory of the mystery of God. Secondly, because the epiphanic is an event—or "perception becomes transport"—we have established a link, and indeed "permeability between aesthetics and dramatics."[32] As he writes at the beginning of the *Theo-Drama*:

> Right at the heart of the *Aesthetics*, the "theological drama" has already begun. "Catching sight" of the glory (*die Erblickung*), we observed, always involves being "transported" by it (*die Entrückung*). But this was all seen from within the aesthetic purview. Now we must allow ourselves the encountering reality to speak in its own tongue or, rather, let ourselves be drawn into its dramatic arena. For God's revelation is not an object to be looked at: it is his action in and upon the world, and the world can

31. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics. Vol. 2, Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles*, ed. John Riches, trans. Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh, and Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 11.

32. See Jonathan Martin Ciraulo, *The Eucharistic Form of God: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Sacramental Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 154.

> only respond, and hence "understand," through action on *its* part.[33]

Considered in its christological fullness, the transcendentals must be drawn into relationship with the "inexhaustible standard," i.e. the glorification of the cosmos in the kenotic self-giving of Jesus Christ.[34] These two elements, the epiphanic and the kenotic, frame the aesthetic-dramatic vision of Balthasar and lay the foundation for our Dantean exploration to come.

The aesthetical master-image of Beatrice is then a source of theodramatic deployment, interpreted under the totalizing reality of love captured in the *Antlitz*. This means that for Dante, catching sight of Beatrice is already a movement into the drama of his pursuit of her. Perhaps more than any Christian work in history, the interpenetrating relationship of aesthetics and dramatics is captured in the mutually indwelling rapport of Beatrician beauty and Dantean love. There would seem then to be no better entry point into this conjoining mystery than within a study of the *Antlitz* of Beatrice. This is our task: "Dante loved Beatrice, with a love that knew it was eternal and that traversed all the kingdoms of the world, Hell, Purgatory and Paradise in order to find his beloved for eternity in the realm of love. He knew that he possessed a right to that eternity."[35]

2. *L'AMOR CHE MI FA BELLA:* DANTE'S AESTHETICS OF LOVE

"To meet Beatrice means for Dante, to enter in upon the heart of Christianity."[36] With these words, Balthasar signals his intention to verify the enduring significance of the *Commedia*, and, more

33. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 15.

34. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* 2, 12.

35. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness: Radio Sermons* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 117.

36. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* 3, 41. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dante, Viaggio attraverso la lingua, la storia, il pensiero della Divina Commedia* (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 1973).

specifically, the indispensable role Beatrice will come to play in it. The "key to the whole journey," as Virgil relays, "is to be found in Beatrice."[37] In fact, the entire *Commedia* is "unequivocally constructed" around Dante's meeting with Beatrice at the top of the Mount of Purgatory.[38] It is not simply a scene; it is the "dynamic goal of the whole journey."[39] From this understanding of the absolute centrality of Beatrice, we can begin to perceive the multivariable presentation of her *Antlitz*, the responding glance and face that lie at the heart of the aesthetics.

> The whole of the *Comedy* is filled with the eyes and the smile, indeed laugh (*riso*), of Beatrice. The thought of it was enough to lead Dante up to her; but the sight of her leads him to the vision of God. The whole journey is constantly called a grace, indeed an unimaginably exalted grace.[40]

Dante's aesthetic theory is then centered around his loving pursuit of reunion with Beatrice. It is, as we will see, an aesthetics of love.

2.1. The Resemblance of Amor *and* Bellezza

Dante is saved "not because he loves but because he is loved."[41] It all begins when Beatrice comes to Dante, with eyes "flashing brighter than the stars."[42] If the stars are a central image and guiding trajectory throughout the *Comedy*, how much more do the eyes of Beatrice reflect the transcendent mystery of the glory of God. Virgil then goes on to describe "that love that makes me speak."[43] Throughout the *Comedy*, Beatrician beauty will initiate the movement of love.

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37. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* 3, 48.

38. Ibid., 54.

39. Ibid., 61.

40. Ibid., 48.

41. Anthony Esolen, "Note to Canto 2," in *Inferno*, by Dante Alighieri, trans. Anthony Esolen (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 413 (hereafter *Inferno*).

42. Dante, *Inferno*, 2.52.

43. Ibid., 2.70.

This initial meeting between Virgil and Beatrice establishes the Dantean pairing of beauty and love. As Balthasar confirms: "Dante's theological aesthetic is based precisely upon the resemblance of *amor* and *bellezza*."[44] This unity of love and beauty will permit Dante to see the transcendentals in relationship or, more specifically, how he sees "in beauty the expressive form of the good and the true."[45] In other words, Dante is asking "whether the ineffable ground of being can express itself in the form of created being."[46] His conclusion, that the ground and form of being meet in the human beauty of Beatrice, affords the possibility of building something exceptional: "The theology of Dante presents itself, perhaps more than any other, as a theology of glory."[47] This tremendous affirmation of Balthasar confirms Dante as a key expositor of the glory of God through created beauty. The unity of love and beauty establishes the first mysterious core of interpenetration between the aesthetics and dramatics. As Balthasar summarizes: "Love's inspiration takes this constantly recurring form, namely that whenever Dante has before him a thought, word or deed to conceive or carry out, he first searches with his eyes for the gaze of his beloved to assure himself that it is right."[48] Beatrice's gaze, the constant point of reference, is not a mere fixation; it is an orientation. Though her beauty is the source and perfector of Dante's love, it must endure an intense purification in order to arrive at the truth of beauty and authentic love. As Balthasar describes: "The grace of being permitted to meet the most beautiful of all women entails the renunciation of all other seductive beauty."[49] And this brings us to the most heart-wrenching scene in the *Inferno*—Paolo and Francesca.

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44. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* 3, 83.

45. Ibid., 103.

46. Ibid., 101.

47. Ibid., 67.

48. Ibid., 63.

49. Ibid., 60.

2.2. Eros and Agape: Francesca, an Antlitz Contrapasso

When paired theologically, beauty and love disclose anew the inner dynamic of eros and agape. This is powerfully presented in Canto 5 of the *Inferno* with a pathos of unmatched intensity. As the gracious and courtly Francesca begins the tragic story of her love for Paolo, we hear intimations of the imagery used to describe Beatrice—inverted in a *chiaroscuro* form.[50] Specifically, it is the story of an *Antlitz*—not just in the dramatic demise of the couple, but even in her manipulative narration to Dante. Her conclusion is one of erotic fatalism: "[l]ove," she says, "which allows no loved one not to love."[51]

This leads to a distinctive aspect of Dante's aesthetics of love: the theological relevance of eros.[52] First, the question of eros in relation to agape must be situated within Dante's experience of the totalizing beauty of Beatrice. The question becomes: what does one do when beauty evokes a love that is inexhaustibly desirous? For Dante, the path is eventually trod, and the mystery clarified: "Beatrice's purificatory and redemptive power in the end remains unique; she alone leads from *eros* to agape, or rather she is that *eros* that is transfigured into agape."[53]

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50. See Dante, *Inferno,* 5.130–35.

51. Ibid., 5.102. See Dorothy Sayers, "Introduction," in *Purgatorio*, by Dante Alighieri, trans. Dorothy Sayers (London: Penguin Books, 1955), 44:

> There is no more insidious enemy of the true Beatrice than the false Beatrice who bears to her so deceptive a superficial likeness. The two are distinguished most readily and surely by their effects—the false image turning forever inwards in narrowing circles of egotism; the true working for ever outwards to embrace the Creator, and all creation.

52. Balthasar, Glory of the Lord 3, 31:

> There appeared, for the first time in Christian theology, the theme of individual, personal and fateful love. Dionysius and Bonaventure had indeed found divine *eros* in the cosmos, and in his *Confessions* Augustine had recognized and confessed personal *eros*, but the first was not personal, and the second not in the least degree theological . . . but this is the claim that Dante makes for Beatrice.

53. Ibid., 36. He continues elsewhere:

> *Eros* is defined as the union of the two moments of love (*philo-*) and wisdom (*sophia*), whose encounter is loving, erotic and, for that very reason, aesthetic. This *eros*, supreme principle of the

If Beatrice is eros transformed into agape within Dante, how then are we to understand the coherence of love within the divine ordering of the universe? Balthasar concludes, alongside Dante: "For the sake of infinite love, it is not necessary for the Christian to renounce finite love . . . he can incorporate his finite love into that which is infinite—but at the cost of terrible sufferings."[54] No one better communicates this transformation of loves than Dante, for he alone "grasped the problem of Christian *eros* and resolves it in the form of Beatrice."[55] This raises the question of how eros is theodramatically transformed into agape by the Beatrician *Antlitz*, and how it does so without the sublimation of eros.[56] For this, the Francesca-Paolo *contrapasso* can be instructive: beneath the formal sin of adultery lies a "poetic sin," i.e. shrinking away from the demands of an adult, maturely committed love.[57] As Charles Williams concludes: "*Eros* is often our salvation from a false *agape*, as *agape* is from tyrannical *eros*."[58] Or in the words of Balthasar:

> We are left with the final reciprocity of *eros* and *agape*, which for Dante are but two names for the same thing: Amor, God's most truly proper name. This reciprocity is nuptial, and the existential experience of this ultimate reality is called—if we are to judge the matter on the poet's level and by his criteria—Dante and Beatrice. This criterion is explicitly subordinated to the criterion of the glorified Church: Mary, not Beatrice, is the final image; Bernard, not Dante, speaks the last word of prayer.[59]

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world, *l'amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle*, cannot, for the poet Dante, refer to "principles of being," but only to beings that actually exist (33).

54. Ibid., 32.

55. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* 2, 21.

56. See ibid., 18: "For the first time in Christian history—the mystery of an eternal love between man and woman, *eros* refined by *agape* and drawn up through all the circles of hell and spheres of the world to the throne of God."

57. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 118.

58. Ibid., 182.

59. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* 3, 81.

Once "every desire has been taken up into the divine form," we can begin to perceive our final theodramatic element in Balthasar's aesthetics—namely, how Beatrice expresses the Marian Church as *anima ecclesiastica*.[60]

2.3. Anima Ecclesiastica *on the Mount of Purgatory*

The purpose of the ascent up the Mount of Purgatory is that eros may be stripped bare "to the point of complete and supremely humiliating nakedness of soul."[61] But stripping bare does not mean sublimated, and here Dante walks a fine line. It was evident from the Francesca episode that Dante detests "aesthetic libertinism" and is entirely committed to the objective governance of the ethical realm.[62] But he likewise affirms the inherent relationship between eros, ethics, and beauty. As Balthasar explains: "There can be no ethics without *eros* and thus without beauty, but even more so, there can be no beauty without ethics, for the latter, according to Dante, constitutes the highest of the intellectual spheres that lie closest to God. Thus, for Dante, the ethical and the aesthetic remain a tightly intertwined unity."[63] The Mount of Purgatory is the path trodden to attain an ethically-perfected eros. But what will sustain Dante through the acts of penance? Virgil's evocation of the gaze of Beatrice, one that awaits him at the summit.

This interplay of eros, ethics, and beauty is expressed in key moments throughout the *Comedy*. First, while still in Hell, Virgil describes Beatrice to Dante as that "sweet soul whose lovely eye sees all."[64] Within this all-seeing *Antlitz* is the promise that, in time, Dante will come to understand the journey of his life. Later, as Dante and Virgil ascend the Mount of Purgatory, they come to see that the souls here are "libertà va cercando"

60. Ibid., 79.

61. Ibid., 54.

62. Ibid., 104.

63. Ibid., 103.

64. Dante, *Inferno*, 10.130.

(searching for freedom).[65] If freedom is the purpose of purgatory, it contains an aesthetical value: here, souls go to "farsi belle" (to beautify themselves).[66] Dante is reinvested in the actual purpose of purgation, as the intrinsic rapport of eros, ethics, and beauty is re-presented. But it is not intellectual synthesis that sustains him on the climb—only the promise of her smile can draw him to the heights.[67] In a seminal moment, Virgil relays:

> Non so se 'ntendi: io dico di Beatrice;
> tu la vedrai di sopra, in su la vetta
> di questo monte, ridere e felice
>
> (You may not understand me—Beatrice.
> For you will see her at the mountaintop;
> she will be smiling in felicity).[68]

His response (Andiamo!) is one of the most remarkable turning points in the narrative. As he nears the Celestial Garden at the top of the climb, Dante describes to Virgil the mounting anticipation of her presence: "Li occhi suoi già veder parmi" (I think I can already see her eyes).[69] As Esolen glosses: "Her eyes: the focus of Beatrice's beauty, reflecting the beauty of the One whom her intellect beholds."[70]

Balthasar can now draw striking theological conclusions from Dante's portrayal of the Beatrician *Antlitz.* With his usual synthesis of biblical and patristic ideas, he writes:

> Beatrice is the model. She is what is called, from Origen to the medieval commentaries on the Canticle, the *anima ecclesiastica*, the soul whose experience and sensibility, thoughts and desires have been assumed into the

65. Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio,* trans. Anthony Esolen (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 1.71 (henceforth cited as: *Purgatorio*).

66. Ibid., 2.75.

67. "Beatrice is herself the mountain. She is, as so many of her sisters have been to their lovers, the means by which purification takes place" (Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 147).

68. Dante, *Purgatorio*, 6.46–48.

69. Ibid., 27.54.

70. Anthony Esolen, "Note to Canto 27, line 54," in *Purgatorio*, 481.

> universality of the *Sponsa Christi*, the bride of the Lamb, the heavenly Jerusalem, the company of all the living and of the saints. Dante is given complete Christian authority to identify his beloved, whom he knows to be with God, with this incarnation of the loving Church, and, in so far as she is this, to expect from her mediation of divine grace for his redemption, purification, illumination and union.[71]

Beatrice, at once allegory and reality, expresses the graced elevation of creaturely love. By doing so, she reveals the absolute core of the Marian Church. Now at the threshold of the Garden on the Mount of Purgatory, we recall that the purification of eros prior to its final heavenly transformation is only possible in and through the Church. Ultimately, the Church is the created locus of inner trinitarian love, found in its perfection in the *Paradiso*. What Dante endured to reach the Church in Beatrice was the perfection of love on the mountain where aesthetics meets dramatics. For the "whole purgation of the mountain is of love; that is, of making the singular the plural."[72]

3. BEATRICE AS *ANTLITZ*: A THEODRAMATIC DEPLOYMENT

The aesthetic richness of a Beatrician *Antlitz* has been largely lost to modern man. By eclipsing the Christian metaphysics of gift, thinkers like Marx and Freud set out to reconstruct the very nature of human freedom. Their presupposition was clear: we "owe no one thanks" for ourselves.[73] Once the gratuitous grounding of human existence has vanished, the notion of being "from another" is interpreted as "man's vexing dependence as an alienating bondage."[74] This will lead directly to the existentialism of Sartre and de Beauvoir who, in the distinction between *en-soi* and *pour-soi*, condemn *le regard* ("the glance") as

71. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* 3, 52.

72. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 165.

73. Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 126.

74. Ibid., 126.

bondage and alienation.[75] As soon as one is looked at, he has become something he is not.

The Christian vision of creation is founded on two trajectories of originating gratitude—toward one's parents and toward God.[76] Here, the responding glance of gratitude becomes the primordial human experience of giftedness. This stands at the metaphysical foundation of any theodramatic deployment, such as the Dantean way to Beatrician beauty. We will begin here, assessing the aesthetic notion of *Antlitz* within this originating experience (described by Balthasar as *Mitsein,* or "being-with") before exploring the inner theological content of the *Antlitz* itself.

3.1. The Maternal Mitsein

As a young child, every human being awakens to his own self-consciousness by being addressed by the love of his mother. Long before the child is aware of his own existence, he looks upon the existence of the other, becoming aware of his existential security in that other because she is love. This means that what is constitutive of human life is a *Mitsein*, or "being with." There is simply no being, and certainly no pursuit of freedom, apart from the givenness of this first experience. We are thus intrinsically ordered to being with others, and this arises first from the *Antlitz* of the mother. As Balthasar writes:

> In the mother's smile, it dawns on him that there is a world into which he is accepted and in which he is welcome, and it is in this primordial experience that he becomes aware of himself for the first time. This founding event of human existence, whose import has been duly recognized only in our own day, accompanies the other functions of growth and upbringing: the feeding and care of the child, his invitation into the environment and his historical tradition. Long before the child learns to speak, a mute dialogue unfolds between mother and child on the basis

75. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1993), pt. 3, ch. 1; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), vol. 2, pt. 1.

76. Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Mary*, 127.

> of the "being with" that is constitutive of every conscious human being.[77]

The *Antlitz* of woman defies aesthetic appraisal because it lies so deep in the grounds of human existence. As the child begins to interpret the loving smile of the mother, he discovers that "her whole gift of self is the answer, awakened by her, of love to love."[78] The answering gaze of the woman, from which the child's self-consciousness will in time emerge, configures it according to the I-Thou structure of love. As we saw in our initial treatment of *Antlitz*, precisely because the woman's gaze contains within it something new—namely the reception of the one seen—the first act of human life is simply a "being received." Though the father participates deeply in the child's journey to consciousness, there is something decisive about the mother—something different about her gaze—that awakens the child to the reality of human life. The child's every subsequent choice will be enveloped in the personal experience of maternal reception and self-giving love. As Balthasar explains:

> The little child does not "consider" whether it will reply with love or nonlove to its mother's inviting smile, for just as the sun entices forth green growth does love awaken love; it is the movement toward the "Thou" that the "I" becomes aware of itself. By giving itself, it experiences: I give *myself*. By crossing over from itself into what is other than itself, into the open world that offers space, it experiences its freedom, its knowledge, its being as spirit.[79]

Long before man becomes aware of himself, he has traveled along the river of the self-giving logic of creation. It can likewise be described as theodramatic: "Lit up from this lightning flash of the origin," man experiences the first intimations of God's self-disclosure.[80] The I-Thou structure of human existence

77. Ibid., 102–3.

78. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3: *Creator Spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 15.

79. Ibid., 15–16.

80. Ibid., 15.

images and flows forth from the inner trinitarian life, itself the perichoretic origins of the mystery of love.

From the *Antlitz* of the mother, the child first learns "to look." Always and ever attentive to the face of the mother, he slowly begins to spiritually interpret reality, always within the ambit of her love. The primary and foundational contact with the mother, their "symbiosis," is not merely biological; it is a spiritual one.[81] The event of her *Antlitz* is the birth of his spiritual life. Therefore, the call to the spiritual life, contained in the mother's smile, is a school in learning how to see. This brings us to the heart of Dante's vision: the acquisition of true sight. As Charles Williams summarizes, the "general maxim of the whole way of Dante is *attention*; 'look,' 'look well.'"[82] This insight is grounded in the dramatic center of the entire *Divine Comedy*, when Beatrice appears to Dante at the summit of the Mount of Purgatory and says: "Guardaci ben! Ben son, ben son Beatrice" (Look at me well! I'm Beatrice, I am she).[83]

As *Veni, sponsa, de Libano* is sung, Dante looks upon the heavenly Beatrice and feels "the crushing glory of / her presence, and had trembled mute with awe."[84] He turns to find Virgil gone and, now sustained by her youthful eyes, Dante must undergo the severity of the final purgation, subject to the admonishment of the beauty he has betrayed.[85] After being washed in the waters of the Lethe and Eunoe, Dante begins his ascent to the Empyrean. Here we come to realize the maternal dimension to Beatrice's *Antlitz*: "She turned her eyes to me then with a sigh / of pity, as a mother in distress / whose child is ill and talks deliriously."[86] Perhaps the key to the truth of the *Mitsein* is the moment when Dante begins to see Heaven through the eyes of Beatrice: "So she instilled her gazing—through my eyes— / into my powers of fancy, and I too / stared at the sun more than our sight could

81. Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Mary*, 104.

82. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 16.

83. Dante, *Purgatorio*, 30.73.

84. Ibid., 30.35–36.

85. Ibid., 30.121.

86. Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso,* trans. Anthony Esolen (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 1.100 (henceforth *Paradiso*).

bear."[87] Just as the child is seen in the *Antlitz* of the mother, so too does he, in a sense, come to see through it as well. His originating moments of sight are entirely referential to the loving glance of the other, in whom he is instinctively and consistently living in relation. Even more will this be the point of departure for the *Paradiso*, where Dante is continually moved beyond the capacities of his nature. Once he begins to see reality through the eyes of Beatrice, Dante can learn from her the meaningfulness of reality: "All things possess / order amongst themselves: this order is / the form that makes the world resemble God."[88]

3.2. The Dyadic Structure of Answering Fruitfulness

Having established the maternal dimension of the feminine *Antlitz*, we are now positioned to move more deeply into its inner theological content. The *Antlitz* of woman expresses her dyadic structure which, in the mind of Balthasar, is the mysterious core rendering her glance the source of answering fruitfulness. As he begins:

> Thus the woman, who is both "answer" and "face" is not only man's delight: she is the help, the security, the home man needs; she is the vessel of fulfillment specially designed for him. . . . Yet her fruitfulness is not a primary fruitfulness: it is an answering fruitfulness, designed to receive man's fruitfulness (which, in itself, is helpless) and bring it to its "fullness."[89]

The biblical grounds of this mystery are given in the two first designations of Eve: as "helpmate" (Gn 2:18) and "companion" (Gn 3:8).[90] There certainly is delight in the original

87. Ibid., 1.52–54.

88. Ibid., 1:103–05.

89. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* 3, 285.

90. For a meditation on the interior gaze of Adam and Eve, see John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 177–78:

> "Nakedness" signifies the original good of the divine vision. It signifies the whole simplicity and fullness of this vision, which shows the "pure" value of man as male and female, the

experience of woman ("bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh," Gn 2:23), but it is the mystery of her *Antlitz* as answering fruitfulness that expresses the deeper meaning of the help and companionship she provides.

Now fruitfulness here is considered broadly: that which is received and given back in the woman is something greater. This finds its highest expression in the physical generation of the child, though not exclusive to it. The first fruits of love arise out of the feminine answer to the man's call: "Since she is both 'answer' and 'face' (*Antwort* and *Antlitz*), she is dependent on the man's 'word' (*Wort*) which calls to her and his 'look' [that is—'*litz*'] which searches for her."[91] Granted, the man-woman relationship is ultimate, insofar as it dismisses any theory of androgynous self-actualization. If woman is the answer to man's call, the responding and receptive gaze to his searching look, then reciprocity stands at the center of sexual differentiation, the very framework with which "a theodramatic theory must deal."[92] As Balthasar describes: "Since it is woman's essential vocation to receive man's fruitfulness into her own fruitfulness, thus uniting in herself the fruitfulness of both, it follows that she is actually the fruit-bearing principle in the creaturely realm."[93] Because of the receptive nature of her femininity, woman is capable of transcending the simple gift-reception structure of human relationships, elevating it to the realm of a new fruitfulness. Again, in the words of Balthasar:

> "pure" value of the body and of its sex. . . . Seeing each other reciprocally, through the very mystery of creation, as it were, the man and the woman see each other still more fully and clearly than through the sense of sight itself, that is, through the eyes of the body. . . . According to Gen 2:25, the man and the woman "did not feel shame"; seeing and knowing each other in all the peace and tranquility of the interior gaze, they "communicate" in the fullness of humanity, which shows itself in them as reciprocal complementarity precisely because they are "male" and "female." At the same time, they "communicate" based on the communion of persons in which they become a mutual gift for each other, through femininity and masculinity.

91. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* 3, 292.

92. Ibid., 290.

93. Ibid., 286.

> The woman does not merely give back to man what she has received from him: she gives him something new, something that integrates the gift he gave her but that "faces" him in a totally new and unexpected form. In this way the woman gives him a twofold answer: a "personal" answer and one that goes beyond the I-Thou relationship.[94]

This "giving of something new," arising out of the answering fruitfulness of woman, carries within it the same directional significance found in the *Antlitz*. It is, in a sense, the fullest expression of it. What is perceived in the glance now becomes the reality of a new life. We can thus conclude: if man represents a "single principle (word, seed)," the woman realizes herself in a "double principle: she is the 'answer' and the common 'fruit' of both of them."[95] She is thus confirmed in her twofold orientation toward the man and the child—a fact that makes her elusive. While in dialogue with the man, she is simultaneously drawing forth the mystery of generativity. "In one relationship," Balthasar writes, "she is the answer that is necessary if the word that calls to her is to attain its full meaning; in the other relationship, she herself is the source . . . . and hence she is the primary call addressed to the child."[96] For this reason, she is not only elusive—she oscillates: "There is an oscillation within woman herself: she is oriented to the man yet has equal rank with him, sharing in the same free human nature."[97]

The elusive and oscillating nature of woman finds a clear expression in the master-image of Beatrice. The higher Dante climbs into Heaven, the more incapable he becomes of understanding her beauty. As Sayers writes: "The beauty of Beatrice's eyes and smile increase as they mount heavenwards, and Dante's power to gaze on her is gradually strengthened until he is able to gaze ultimately on God Himself." Turning to Beatrice, "his vision's greater yearning and true goal," he sees that "she blazed like lightning fire, / so bright I found it unendurable."[98] Dante's

94. Ibid., 286.

95. Ibid., 287.

96. Ibid., 293.

97. Ibid., 297.

98. Dante, *Paradiso*, 3.126–29.

view of Beatrice is largely bridal; she remains the highest form of earthly beauty, now transfigured in heavenly grace. But if the *Antlitz* of woman contains within it this oscillating and elusive quality—namely that it is more than answering fruitfulness that elicits desires—then man is dispossessed of both himself and the desire to contain within himself the beauty he beholds. It is thereby the dyadic structure of woman, and her capacity to transcend the natural order of gift and reception, that makes her—and precisely her *Antlitz*—an opening to God.

In Canto 10, Dante loses Beatrice. As he hears her give praise to God, he suddenly finds himself so transported in his own prayer that he forgets about Beatrice:

> Mortal heart never fed on any food / that made it readier to sing the Lord's / praises, and give itself in gratitude, / Than I was when I heard my Lady's words: / I gave my love to Him so utterly, / Beatrice was forgotten in eclipse. / She wasn't displeased—rather so smiled at me that the resplendence of her laughing eyes clove my mind, drawing it from unity.[99]

Awkward and estranged in the moment, Dante recovers his existential stability in an *Antlitz* of laughing eyes. This is a critical junction in the journey to the Empyrean; for if the entire journey of Dante is the authentication of earthly loves in the love of God, and if the former are crystallized and distilled in the beauty of Beatrice, then we have reached a moment where she is finally beginning to be loved purely in God. As they ascend to the fifth level, "Beatrice turned her lovely glance to me, / smiling in beauty I surrender with / visions remembrance can't accompany."[100]

Lastly, the dyadic structure of answering fruitfulness, latent in every *Antlitz* of woman, finds its *raison d'être* in Canto 18. By now, Dante has been totally dispossessed in love. Enveloped within the love of God, the created beauty of Beatrice is amplified, and his relationship to her utterly transformed. Her *Antlitz* remains the anchor of his life, now spiritually interpreted from a realm of supernatural grace. She instructs him with these time-

99. Ibid., 10:55–63.

100. Ibid., 14:79–81.

less words: "Volgiti e ascolta; / ché non pur ne' miei occhi è paradiso" (Listen now, turn around—my eyes are not the only Paradise).[101] His entire life, so intimately bound to his love of Beatrice, now becomes clear: what he saw in her eyes was Paradise all along. The *Antlitz* of woman is transcended by the mystery of her answering fruitfulness, an expression of the mystery of God. As Dorothy Sayers writes, "Dante, gazing in the eyes of Beatrice, has experienced the perfection and fulfilment of all desire, and no wonder, for in her he has beheld the reflection of God."[102] And once God is discovered in the eyes of Beatrice, Dante will see reflected in them the entirety of the cosmos, concentric spheres revolving around [him] whose love moves all things.[103] Theodramatic at their core, Dante's aesthetics of love now culminate in Mary, the bride of God and the mother of Christ.

3.3. "Into the face that most resembles Christ": Mary and the Eternal Femininity of the Church

In Canto 31 of the *Paradiso*, Dante turns to find that Beatrice has gone to take her place in the celestial rose. "Where is she?" he asks Bernard, who will accompany him as guide for the final stage of the journey. Together, their final contemplation turns to the true pinnacle of created beauty—Mary.[104] As Bernard instructs him, Dante's final task is to see how the Marian is revealed in the Beatrician, and, thereby, to come to fully behold divine glory. "Into that face that resembles Christ / now look: for by her radiance only she / can render you prepared for seeing Christ."[105] In Mary, the feminine *Antlitz* fully discloses Christ; for from her, the human face of Christ was born. In this way, the *Paradiso* will come to a Mariological close.

Beatrice remains for Dante the paragon of earthly beauty, whose *Antlitz* has brought him through the depths of Hell, up

101. Ibid., 18:20.

102. Dorothy Sayers, "Note to Canto 18," in *Paradiso*, by Dante Alighieri, trans. Dorothy Sayers and Barbara Reynolds (London: Penguin Books, 1962), 219.

103. See Dante, *Paradiso*, 28.10.

104. Dante, *Purgatorio*, 31.79.

105. Dante, *Paradiso*, 32.85–87.

the Mount of Purgatory, and into the celestial glory of Paradise. But now the summit of earthly beauty is Mary, "into whose eyes the eyes of Beatrice are transmuted."[106] Beatrice's eyes must now give way to Mary's. For the *Antlitz* of Beatrice was his mode of knowing; within it unfolded the deepening beauty and wonder proper to Heaven alone. In the words of Charles Williams: "The eyes of Beatrice are seen no more; the eyes of Mary are seen instead . . . they are the eyes of the God-bearer, the last of the images."[107] This final image of God expresses the feminine logic of created fullness. It is in her gaze that the dyadic structure of answering fruitfulness comes to bear as visible in all of created being. Mary, as the lasting image of God, is not simply the reflection of divine glory; she is the mother of the *Logos* of creation. In her, each creature within the hierarchy of the cosmos is revealed in its proper order and lasting place—the eternal vision of God. "Ultimately," concludes Balthasar, "[Dante's] Paradise has a Marian form."[108]

If Mary fully expresses the "eternal feminine," then our theodramatic deployment of the Beatrician *Antlitz* must be, in its essence, Mariological. First and foremost, Mary is the theological person *par excellence*. If "every grace implies a mission," one that has a "qualitative, personalizing, and socializing effect," then the singular grace of her Immaculate Conception confers a mission that is indispensable and wholly unique within God's plan of salvation history.[109] This mission is her divine maternity, the task of offering a *fiat* on behalf of all creation and thereby assuming the role of *theotokos*. It is a dramatic role entirely coextensive with Christ: "Nowhere does she seem to be at home; except in her Son."[110]

It is upon the *Antlitz* of the Mother of God that the newborn Church will gaze. Her *Mitsein* awakens all ecclesial consciousness, even that of the apostolic office. As with every *Antlitz*,

106. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 112.

107. Ibid., 222.

108. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* 3, 82. See also Ralph McInerny, *Dante and the Blessed Virgin Mary* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

109. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama* 3, 349.

110. Ibid., 319.

what is looked upon bears the newness of the real. Upon the countenance of Mary, the Church must gaze to find herself in her answering fruitfulness. Mary is thus "the peerless prototype of the Church, and as such, the Church's eschatological goal."[111] This prototypical existence in the Church is likewise the true *typos*: "the *Realsymbol* and epitome of the Church herself."[112] In Mary, the Church finds her "personal center," the place where the Church both discovers and fulfills her mission. She thus confers on the Church her own dyadic structure—the mother of Christ and the bride of God. Hers is the totalizing reality of the Church, whose overarching and all-encompassing femininity is answering fruitfulness to the living God. As Balthasar summarizes:

> When we spoke of "Woman as answer," she appeared as a dyad, as an answering "face" and as the principle of mutual fruitfulness, of offspring. . . . Now Christ, in terms of his person, is God; in terms of his human nature, he is a man. He elicits a response, and the "face" that responds to him is not only created humanity as a whole, not only the feminine reality of the Church as a collective (under the heading of "offspring"), but, of necessity, an individual woman; and this woman must form a unity with the principle of mutual fruitfulness.[113]

In short, she can be described as the *Antlitz* of the Church, the very responding gaze to the Father which inhabits and transforms the cosmos in the life of grace.

Addressing at last the mystery of woman in the Church, we return to Beatrice. If Mary is the archetypal woman, whose *Antlitz* flowed purely into her *fiat*, then we have been given our form. Beatrice is a Marian reality, an image reflecting the mystery of the Mother of God. Just as Dante had to undergo his journey in order to see God in the mystery of human love, so, too, must every woman undertake the work of becoming Beatrician—and, by doing so, express the mystery of Mary-Church. As Balthasar will conclude:

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111. Ibid., 338–39.

112. Ibid., 333.

113. Ibid., 351.

> But it is the eyes of Beatrice in which this beauty is concentrated, like lightning, those eyes, which even from behind the thick veil that conceals her before the confession, enflame the poet, and which in Paradise transports him upward from sphere to sphere. Beatrice looks up to God, and her eyes mirror Heaven. Dante looks into that mirror and finds himself gradually carried up above. The Eternal Feminine that draws us up is more than just a symbol, far more than an allegory; it is reality and extends, without break up through all the gradations of reality, from the tangible, earthly body of the beloved, past her glorified figure, as far as St. Lucy, who represents the *Ecclesia sanctorum*, as far as Mary, the archetype and foundation of the receptive and virginally fruitful Church.[114]

CONCLUSION

"We have hardly yet begun to be looked at or to look."[115] These words of Charles Williams propose the Dantean vision of reality and offer anew the invitation to begin seeing. From a theological perspective, the words are also evocative—we have yet to "be looked at or to look" at the Church's Marian face. We must begin again in the originating sight of the God-man, who as a human child awoke to consciousness through the loving gaze of Mary. It was her *Antlitz* that captivated him and held his gaze all the way to the Cross. As John Paul II reflects:

> Thereafter Mary's gaze, ever filled with adoration and wonder, would never leave him. At times it would be a questioning look, as in the episode of the finding in the Temple: "Son, why have you treated us so?" (Lk 2:48); it would always be a penetrating gaze, one capable of deeply understanding Jesus, even to the point of perceiving his hidden feelings and anticipating his decisions, as at Cana (cf. Jn 2:5). At other times it would be a look of sorrow, especially beneath the Cross, where her vision would still be that of a mother giving birth, for Mary not only shared the passion and death of her Son, she also received the new son given to her in the beloved disciple (cf. Jn 19:26–27). On the morning of Easter hers would be a gaze radiant

114. Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* 3, 102.

115. Williams, *Figure of Beatrice*, 232.

> with the joy of the Resurrection, and finally, on the day of Pentecost, a gaze afire with the outpouring of the Spirit (cf. Acts 1:14).[116]

The *Antlitz* of woman, elevated to perfection in Marian form, is constitutive of God's saving work. The receptive gaze of Mary toward her Son on the Cross is the Church in her purest essence. To embody this mystery is to be for others what Beatrice was for Dante. All women, desiring to be Beatrician, must abide in the form of the Marian *Antlitz*. By doing so, they will come to understand the theodramatic significance of their own feminine personhood. And it is here—and here alone—that the question of the role of women in the Church must begin.

"I hope to write of her that which has never been written of any other woman," wrote Dante as he concludes his *Vita nuova*.[117] What began as poetic homage concludes with the feminine disclosure of divine glory. In the *Antlitz* of Beatrice, Dante is led to God. So, too, is every Christian in the Marian *Antlitz* of the Church. For it is God, the Author of creation, who, in Mary, has written "that which has never been written of any other woman." And to her eyes we must ever return. □

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116. *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, n. 10.

117. Dante, *Vita nuova*, 84.