

THE SPACE OF TRAGEDY:
READING BALTHASAR'S DRAMATIC WITH ARTAUD

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ABSTRACT Balthasar's *Theo-Drama* is the first modern theological work to engage with the dramatic approach. This voluminous work presents and accounts for the world as a stage for the dynamic interplay between God and mankind. Some scholars, however, contend that Balthasar risks curtailing the weight and complexity of human existential struggle. In response, this study takes up Balthasar's call to approach the dramatic from 'various angles.' It specifically revisits his thoughts about the role of language and tragedy and situates them alongside Artaud's conception of the 'theater of cruelty.' This parallel reading explores their shared emphases on the limitations of language and the importance of affirmation in facing tragic reality. This essay observes how drama accommodates the aporetic nature of tragedy and fosters enactive affirmation despite the constraints of language.

KEYWORDS: Artaud, Balthasar, dramatic, theater of cruelty, tragedy

Introduction

Hans Urs von Balthasar is one of the most prolific Christian theologians in the 20th century, with almost a thousand written works to his name. Widely revered across Christian circles—from Catholicism to Eastern Orthodoxy—his enduring legacy prompted Johann Roten to describe him as 'a monument more lasting than bronze' (*monumentum aere perennius*; Roten 1969: 66). Roten borrowed the term from Horace's famous line in *Odes* III.30.1. Among Balthasar's major works, the *Theo-Drama* is appraised as "the heart of von Balthasar's huge theological trilogy" as it shows the depth and maturity of his thought (Quash 2005: 10; cf. Balthasar 1973: 15). In terms of chronology, *Theo-Drama* also serves as the centerpiece of Balthasar's trilogy as it was published in 1973–1983, after *The Glory of the Lord* (1961–1967) and before

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Theo-Logic (1985–1987). Balthasar's dramatic maintains that drama helps us not only to understanding theology, but also how it relates to reality. Here Balthasar viewed drama as an analogy for how "life is naturally dramatic," where the triune God—as a 'theatrical trio' (Nichols 2000: 11, 29)—interact with human beings as fellow actors (*Mitspieler*; Balthasar 1973: 129, 248, 254–257, 262–268, 279–281; 1976: 58, 74). The 'trio' here points to God as the playwright, director, and actor. God the director maintains the balance of creativity and freedom between Himself as the playwright and Christ as the primary actor with human beings as His co-actors.

In his 1803 lectures on aesthetics, Hegel extrapolated Aristotle's poetic typology and posited drama as the superior form of poetry, compared to the epic and lyric forms. According to Hegel, epic and lyric poetry represent two fundamentally opposing modes of presentation. Epic poetry offers an objective portrayal of external reality with nationalistic spirit, while lyric poetry embodies the subjective expression of inner life, reflecting the interior world. Drama, however, *sublates* these contrasting forms into a synthesis, 'the most perfect totality of content and form' (Hegel 1803: 985–986, 1035ff., 1158).

It is worth mentioning that, although Hegel borrowed the poetic typology from Aristotle, his extrapolation widely departs from Aristotle's conception. Unlike Hegel, Aristotle distinguished epic poetry from tragedy rather than from the lyric form, focusing solely on their differences in structure and metre. While Aristotle defined drama as 'enactive representation' (*prattein mimēsis*), Hegel discarded mimesis (of natural beauty) as an aesthetic standard because, for him, natural beauty is nothing more than pure appearance (*Schein*). (Hegel 1798: 3; cf. Aristotle 1995: 114–123). Drawing after Hegel's tripartite typology of the dramatic, epic, and lyric genres, Balthasar argued that only drama could accommodate both epic and lyric voices without annihilating their polarization. Drama stands as a 'dimension of experience' that actualizes the superposition of absolute order and dynamic particularity, overarching the perennial tension between the epic and lyric genres (Balthasar 1976: 37, 51). Hegel likewise noted that drama conveys 'willed actualization' (Hegel 1803: 1161). In dramatic action, the epic motif is shaped by the lyrical (individual) disposition. Balthasar, however, was critical against Hegel's vision of totalitarian synthesis, viewing it as a manipulation that undermines authentic drama. Hegel assumed a divine perspective in "grasping the historical events as precisely as possible and describe them in their abiding 'universal significance.'" (Balthasar 1976: 45, 55). For Hegel, drama must be 'self-reposing' and "resolves every conflict and contradiction" (Hegel 1803: 1163). It only assumes a concrete form so that it may liberate the Idea from the form itself. Mental performative hereby substitutes concrete action (Hendrix 2005: 190, 197, 204).

Despite Balthasar's wariness against Hegel, Quash observed that his overreliance on Hegel comes at a cost (Quash 1997: 298; 1999: 12 n. 21; cf. Balthasar 1973: 66). In his search for absolute harmony, Balthasar employed theoretical reduction to suppress lyrical tension, attenuating the intensity of existential struggle. Even Nichols characterized Balthasar as being 'favourable to totality-thinking.' Nichols 2006: 57. Whereas Nichols saw 'totality' positively and contrasted it with the closure of a 'system,' it is evident that Balthasar sought to establish "a kind of system of dramatic categories" (Balthasar 1973: 128). Over-harmonization as such appears on his reading of the New Testament, as well as on his analyses of Euripides and Shakespeare (Quash 1999: 152, 158, 164–165, 167; 2005: 148, 166). Hence, Kilby (2012: 65) questioned whether Balthasar, in fact, exhibited the 'manner' and 'mode of thought' of a 'theater critic' rather than that of "an actor *within* the drama." Balthasar 1976: 55. On the one hand, the epic genre encloses history as a measured, impartial fixation; it narrates history with objectification and in deterministic manner. On the other hand, its lyric counterpart is looking to liberate the self-expression of the emergent subject. Hegel believed that dramatic poetry could draw us nearer to 'the spirit in its wholeness' because it accommodates "objectivity which proceeds from the subject" as well as "subjectivity which gains portrayal in its objective realization and validity" (Hegel 1803: 1039).

To address this issue, I will read Balthasar's *Theo-Drama* with Antonin Artaud, and approach it as an interdisciplinary framework (Balthasar 1973: 130; cf. Quash 2005: 1; Block, Jr. 2004: 207). The objective of this study is to reconfigure the space for existential struggle within Balthasar's dramatic. Following Arrandale's seminal work, I turn to Artaud because his concept of the 'theater of cruelty' (*théâtre de la cruauté*) resonates with the drama of salvation—which, as Arrandale (2007: 111) pointed out, "wakes us up heart and nerve" and lacerates us, having the effect of shocking us into becoming part of the dramatic action." The citation refers to Artaud 1978a: 82. On this note, I will start by revisiting Arrandale's project and establishing the approach that I take. The reading will then focus on two interrelated ideas: the limitations of language and the affirmation of tragedy.

Minding the Gaps

Over two decades ago, in 2000, Arrandale initiated a constructive interlocution between Balthasar and Artaud. He began by presenting his observation that Balthasar "has neglected a key dramatic theorist who can be of immense use to the theologian who wants to employ dramatic theory in his or her theology" (Arrandale 2007: 100). In the first *Theo-Drama*, Balthasar (1973: 300 n. 9) brusquely noted that Artaud "denies the actor any 'personal initiative.'" This is the only mention of Artaud

that Balthasar made in the entire *Theo-Drama*. It is also worth noting that, in this instance, Balthasar did not even cite Artaud. This explains why his note on Artaud's "athletic approach to the emotions" overlooks Artaud's intention in "Un Athlétisme Affectif" (1978a: 125–132). Here, Artaud aspired for the 'athleticism of soul' by advocating for athletic training. He believed that physical fitness would enable actors to embody their deepest affection and passion with immediacy and intensity. For this reason, Arrandale intended to give a proper reintroduction to Artaud and the theater of cruelty.

Arrandale first clarified that Artaud's provocative term, 'theater of cruelty' does not imply viciousness or sadistic violence. Instead, it refers to life as a 'festivity' (*fête*) that should be affirmed as it is. As such, no one could leave the theater unscathed from its force. (Artaud 1978a: 77, 80–83, 95–100, 110; 1978c: 312–313). For Arrandale (2007: 105–107, 109), this idea best captures the drama of salvation, where everyone is involved and affected.

On the other hand, Arrandale also noticed the incompatibility in the dialogue. While Artaud averred that theater should not be a mere imitation of life, Balthasar insisted on the importance of imitative participation. Arrandale tried to resolve this issue by emphasizing the drama of salvation as an 'unrepeatable production' and 'remains unfinished.' (Arrandale 2007: 107 n. 24, 111–112; cf. Balthasar 1976: 284).

The disjunction, however, probably lies elsewhere. Although it is true that Balthasar emphasized the importance of imitative participation (in Christ), he also warned that "theater owes its very existence substantially to man's need to recognize himself as playing a role," in such a way so that the play "should never be merely a poor imitation of life in the concrete with its unsolved problems" (Balthasar 1973: 262). Representation (*Vorstellung*) in drama is 'both showing and concealing,' it serves as a disguise (*Verstellung*) that shows what is not there or should be there (Balthasar 1973: 173, 261). Theater is an 'ambiguous mirror' which, despite enabling theological self-understanding, "reflects only indirectly." (Balthasar 1973: 86). This note closely aligns with Artaud's insistence on destroying imitative gestures from the theatrical act (Derrida 1967b: 344). And yet, we must add that Artaud also wrote that life itself is 'the imitation of a transcendental principle (*principe transcendant*)'—with which art 'connects' us (Artaud 1978c: 218, 242). Therefore, Balthasar's and Artaud's views on representation (*mimēsis*) are not as diametrically opposed as they might initially seem.

The more pressing issue is that Arrandale's study proves inadequate as a foundation for this discussion. His concluding stance—that "it is dramatic theory that serves theology, and not the other way round" (Arrandale 2007: 112)—is at odds with Artaud's vision of a theater that 'inhabits or *produces* a non-theological space' (Derrida

1967b: 345; cf. Pizzato 1998: 70). Although it is true that Artaud's 'non-theological' vision also qualifies as 'pantheological' (Pizzato's label, 'pantheological,' not only signifies Artaud's pan(en)theistic theology, but also portrays his likeness to Pan, the ancient Greco-Roman deity. Pizzato 1998: 83), his 'wild theological imaginings' are 'idiosyncratic and unstable' (Morfee 2005: 3, 12–18, 72), even verging on Gnosticism. Given that Balthasar (1973: 131; 1976: 146–149; 1978: 133–142, 289, 302–305, 519; 1980: 380; 1983: 67) identified Gnosticism as a major threat to dramatic theology in particular and to Christian theology in general, Arrandale's stance becomes untenable without a thorough scrutiny of Artaud's 'Gnostic' theology (Cf. O'Regan 2001 and 2006 studies on this subject. Their theological dissonance is further amplified when we consider Artaud's relentless effort to 'dissociate' himself from the 'Christian spirit' (Derrida 1967b: 364), as well as his blasphemous poetic tirades against Christ during his internment at the Rodez asylum in 1947 (Artaud 1948: 1563–1566; 1989: 11–28)). Artaud's scatological imagery, however, possibly convey a much more intricate ambivalence rather than a pure contempt. It is known that, since 1944 to his death in 1948, Artaud had suffered from excruciating abdominal cramps and severe hemorrhaging (Danchin & Roumieux 2015: 696). His physical ailments left him drained and increasingly isolated. His gastrointestinal bleeding may have profoundly influenced his grotesque portrayal of Christ as excrement (in "L'Histoire Vraie de Jésus-christ"), not only because he perceived being (*l'être*) itself as ordure, but also because he once translated 'cruelty' as 'tearing (*extirper*) God out through the blood' (Artaud 1974b: 83–87, 102). This shocking imagery not only reflects Artaud's rebellion against codified religions, but also his attempt to express the unbearable tension between the divine and the abject, exposing a God who descends into the most base and revolting aspects of human existence. Under this light, I can emphasize with the notion that Artaud, to a certain extent, offered 'a veritable tragic theology' (Bouchard 1989: 181). Regrettably, the assessment is absent from Arrandale's study and too extensive to undertake here.

I propose to read Artaud's work alongside *Theo-Drama* as the work of a 'banner figure for interdisciplinary study' (Murphy 2008: 29, 31). As far as we know, despite Balthasar's enormous contributions to theological studies, he regarded himself as a Germanist 'by nature and upbringing' (Oakes 1997: 73). While undergoing his theological formation, Balthasar reportedly devoted much of his time to reading and translating prominent contemporary French literary works into German (Moss & Oakes 2004: 4). As Block observed, even the exuberance of his theology "is due, at least in part, to his literary training and sensibility" (Block 2004: 207). It is, therefore, unsurprising that Balthasar insisted that "what is generally called 'theology' must be 'theo-drama'" (1976: 36) and urged us to approach the 'non-definable theo-drama'

from various angles (1976: 62). Bringing the divine revelation to the equation would not help to define it, as Balthasar wrote, because there is no ‘comprehensive formula’ to it (Balthasar 1976: 103). Even Christianity itself is, for him, ‘practically a stage play’ (1976: 11). Given Balthasar’s (1976: 151) view that theology itself is a part of the drama, it is most fitting that we first explore the role of language in drama, before examining how it articulates the struggle of human existence.

The Role of Language in Drama

Drawing on Calderon’s view of the world as a stage (*theatrum mundi*), Balthasar saw the world as a stage for the divine drama (*theatrum Dei*). While the analogy can be traced back to Homeric epics, for Balthasar (1973: 168, 254; 1978: 505; 1980: 132), it was the Baroque dramatist, Calderón de la Barca who most clearly emphasized the individual’s mission as a role within a divine play, with God as the ‘Lord of the play’ in *El Gran Teatro del Mundo* (1641). Our drama is a ‘play within the play’ of divine drama (Balthasar 1973: 20; 1976: 53). Life is a drama that has always already begun *in media res*—it includes everyone without exception and unfolds in languages that have always preceded us as ‘middle beings’ (*medium quoddam*; Balthasar 1973: 52ff., 262–265, 306ff.; 1976: 58, 92, 360 n. 40; 1978: 20, 113 n. 34; 1980: 355; cf. Artaud 1978a: 13–14. Horace originally used the plural form, ‘in medias res’ (Ars Poetica l. 148)). Our lives are always already caught up in the middle of this drama since our existence is a participation (*ens per participationem*) in the Divine as the necessary being (*ens per essentiam*; Balthasar 1973: 69; 1976: 58, 87). Balthasar, therefore, strived for a language that would ‘communicate a dramatic faith’ in the divine Logos—who created us and the world—to us as His fellow actors in the middle of the world stage (Quash 2005: 39; cf. Balthasar 1973: 254–255; 1976: 68–69, 292; 1978: 525–535).

The role of language in drama extends beyond the confines of the script. While Balthasar held that the playwright’s ideal must be realized on the stage, he also noted that no script exists in isolation from its performance (Arrandale 2007: 105; cf. Balthasar 1973: 262). In fact, the playwright’s ideal can only be actualized through the director’s orchestration and the actors’ enactment of the roles. The director plays a crucial role in translating the abstract ideal of the script into the concrete reality of the stage. The actors’ embodied enactment breathes life into the drama because they are active participants who engage with the text and with one another in a dynamic, ever-evolving way (Balthasar 1973: 281–282). Thus, drama is a ‘making-present’ that fosters and facilitates dynamic participation (Balthasar 1973: 18, 301–302, 307).

Artaud (1971: 95), likewise, claimed that “all true language is incomprehensible.” Thus, he sought to liberate drama from the tyranny of the text—which, in his view,

imposed rigid and automated (*a priori*) dialogue (Artaud 1978a: 86–87, 95, 107). He believed that the separation of life and theater, as well as the divide between actor and spectator, will vanish only when theater stages ‘without taking the text into account’ (*sans tenir compte du texte*; Artaud 1978a: 95; cf. 1979b: 220). This, however, does not mean that Artaud wished to abolish text or representation from drama. As Derrida observed, Artaud should invoke ‘originary representation’ to get rid of representation (Derrida 1967b: 349; cf. 1967a: 262, 267). Visser labels this sort of originary representation as a ‘crescive writing’—a creative, affective, zoological, ‘vital language of God.’ (Visser 2021: 103, 132–134, 158–159). On the contrary, text is as important as gesture, sound, and lighting for him. His intention is to promote a bodily/gestural language that restores the integrity of letter, speech, breath, body, gestures, and life itself (Artaud 1979b: 219; 1978a: 36).

Theatrical act cannot attain wholeness out of the script or through its staging alone; it needs to engage with ‘representation’ as the rupture between thought and being (*l'être*; Artaud 1978a: 9; cf. Blanchot 1959: 55–58). The integration of life and theater requires creative freedom in such a way that no one is reduced to an instrument of representation (Derrida 1967b: 348). This brings us to an even clearer understanding that Balthasar’s (1973: 300 n. 9) claim that Artaud “denies the actor any ‘personal initiative’” is a misreading. Artaud believed that a living theater must break the boundaries of spoken language apart (Artaud 1978a: 120). It should transcend the language of imitation and representation, leading us into a space that thoughts and life converge. This space is a ‘spasm of being,’ a wellspring from which thought and poetry rise from the depths of dismal reality (cf. Bident 1998: 351).

Artaud learned from poetry that theater needs a language of its own, distinct from the ordinary language used in everyday speech. Poetic language emerges from a pure, mystical becoming, distinct from the origins of *des mots* (words in common usage), yet without abandoning them. In poetic language, Artaud found ‘a transcendent state of life’ that demands uncompromising obedience (Artaud 1978a: 118; cf. pp. 13–14, 98–99, 247; 1979a: 13; Derrida 1967a: 256; cf. Blanchot 1959: 57; 1969: 313, 435. Derrida, nonetheless, questioned if Artaud’s ideal of the stage language itself is poetic or semiotic as he often picked word simply for its sound instead of its meaning (Derrida 1967b: 365; cf. Artaud 1978a: 90; Barbancey 1997; Thévenin 1986: 10, 37). Under this light, he translated ‘cruelty’ as a convulsive passion for life, a passion that stirs action in the troubled hearts. This language unleashes forces (*dégage des forces*) beyond words and compels action amid our existential struggle (Artaud 1978a: 13, 30, 84, 99; cf. Derrida 1967a: 291; 1967b: 343–344, 353–356). Such a language can only arise from the ‘perfect syllables’ of the Infinite (Artaud 1974a: 97).

In a similar vein, Balthasar acknowledged that our verbal (‘particular’) language

is both limited and indispensable. On the one hand, such language is an abstraction that falls short of capturing the concrete, ‘inarticulate expression of the thing of beauty’—which “speaks to us’ from a region in which language operates transcendently” (Balthasar 1976: 25). On the other hand, this fragmentary abstraction is necessary for formulating and communicating embodied experiences that would otherwise remain silent. This perplexing situation even extends to the divine drama, where “God’s word is always ‘in the process of interpreting.” (Balthasar 1976: 91).

Balthasar, nonetheless, added that action transcends the inherent constraints of verbal expression. This is most clearly demonstrated when the Logos incarnated as the ‘consummating protagonist’ on the world stage (Balthasar 1978: 21). Christ the Logos represented God’s *infinitum actu* by actualizing ‘passive obedience’ (*obedientia passiva*) in His *descensus ad inferos* (Balthasar 1980: 313). The death of the Logos is ‘the center of the acting area’ (Balthasar 1978: 48) that reveals how drama necessitates action (*dran*) to enact (*prattein*) the struggle (*agōn*) beyond the limits of verbal and logical articulation (cf. Aristotle 1995: 37, 41, 79, 115, 135; Bywater 1909: 155). The death of ‘the ineffable God’ (Balthasar 1973: 85) dismantles and defies the confines of language as it speaks more powerfully than any word ever could.

Even in what is commonly understood as a state of non-active interim, Christ’s ‘passive obedience’ “plants within eternal death a manifesto of eternal life” (Balthasar 1969b: 180). In His descent into the abyss, where all signs of life seem completely extinguished, His ‘passive obedience’ manifests the most profound form of active surrender to the divine will instead of the lack of action. His obedience in the abyss of existence speaks louder than words, showing how even the state of suspension can indeed be ‘the noblest element of the dramatic tension’ (Balthasar 1973: 251; cf. 1976: 13).

The first part of our reading highlighted the corresponding insight between Balthasar and Artaud regarding the importance and limitations of language in representing the drama of existence and its inexpressible struggle. They both underscored the constitutive importance of non-verbal language in drama, where the enactive ‘spasm of being’ speaks beyond logical account. Just as Artaud advocated for a mystical language, free from the dictate of verbal discourse, Balthasar found ‘the central area for dramatic action’ in the death of the Logos, ‘the ineffable God.’ In the next section, we will delve deeper into tragedy as the space where the struggle of existence unfolds.

The Affirmation of Tragedy

Balthasar’s theological stance on tragedy is clear: “Christian theology alone can prevent the tragic dimension from this self-destruction and from being absorbed and

nullified in stoically conceived transcendence” (Balthasar 1973: 433). At the same time, he aspired to a theology ‘full of dramatic tension’ between ‘the finite order and the infinite’ (Balthasar 1973: 47, 128). Just as the central action in drama emerges through the *anagnōrisis* (realization) of struggle (Balthasar 1976: 190, 194), the *logos* of Balthasar’s dramatic is dialogical; it speaks of the mystery of the incarnate Logos who became a *pathos* between God and mankind (Balthasar 1976: 62, 71–72). Balthasar devoted the entire second section of the 1980 *Theo-Drama* to discuss Christ’s incarnation as God’s becoming *pathos*. The label ‘theopathic’ here underlines the analogical nature of our epistemic and linguistic endeavors (cf. Peckham 2015: 354).

Drama represents the theopathic participation in our struggle in the ‘floating middle’ of existence (Balthasar 1985: 138). As discussed earlier, this participation often confounds verbal expressions and eludes logical explanation because the *pathos* is the Logos of ‘the ineffable God,’ who “sinks into the silence of death” (Balthasar 1980: 359). Therefore, he stated in an earlier work (Balthasar 1952: 39):

God’s Word is not especially concerned with protecting humanity in this world from suffering and death; neither did the Word enter the world simply to remove anxiety or to preserve people from it as, for example, the philosophy and practical wisdom of the Stoics try to do.

In tragedy, the enactment of existential struggle is evident through the staging of social upheavals, monstrous forces, and fatal conflicts (Artaud 1978a: 48, 119). For Artaud, tragedy shatters the superficial solution of philosophical abstraction and, in doing so, liberates us from false hopes in institutional or cosmic (naturalistic) justice. For this reason, Derrida (1967a: 253) stated from the outset that we can only ‘open a naïve discourse’ when speaking ‘in the direction of Artaud.’ As he portrayed in *Les Cenci*, there is no true deliverance from the tyranny of abuse as long as we live in this world. Our institutions are corrupt, and the natural world is indifferent to our suffering. Beatrice, trapped in the unrelenting abuse of her father, Count Cenci, was forced to confront the inadequacy of the justice system. In desperation, she even questioned divine justice and ultimately took justice into her own hands by committing parricide. Yet, her defiant act left her with a lingering sense of futility rather than triumphant satisfaction. From her impending and gruesome execution, Beatrice finally realized that she would come to be like death itself (Artaud 1978b: 210).

Artaud’s ghastly dramatization of Beatrice’s tragedy reflected the torment of his own life. From an early age, he suffered from meningitis, which left him with lifelong neurological issues, chronic pain, and periods of mental instability. Raised in ‘rigid Catholicism,’ he grew into “a Jew who couldn’t bear to call himself a Jew” (Lotring-

er 2003: 12, 13). Artaud's troubled relationship with his distant father and unstable mother contributed to a chronic stammer. He lived in poverty, ensnared in a vicious cycle of debilitating illness and dependence on painkillers. While his frail body was ravaged by inoperable colorectal cancer, his mind battled severe depression, delirium, and paraphrenia.

To make matters worse, Artaud's literary career was marked by failure. His concept of the theater of cruelty alienated him from the mainstream public. Even as a surrealist, he was 'excommunicated' and completely abandoned by André Breton. Artaud's final performance was laden with inaudible recitation, stammering, sobbing, roaring, and frantic ranting, before he rushed offstage in terror. He died of a heart attack at the age of 51, likely caused by an (accidental) overdose of chloral hydrate (Thévenin 1965: 108–109; Hayman 1996: 17–24; Lotringer 2003: 22–25, 54, 95, 137–138, 206).

For Artaud, theater is a 'plague' or a 'complete crisis' that either kills or heals; it is never merely complacent art or a spectacle meant for entertainment (Artaud 1978a: 30–31; 1978c: 222). He aspired for a theater that carried a 'convulsive, passionate life,' brimming with 'moral purity at any cost' (Artaud 1978a: 118). As Marthe Robert (1996: 25) described it, his work is "the desperate search for an exit; it revolves entirely around a cry of suffering." The theater of cruelty expresses his yearning for "the impossible finite/infinite asymptote of death and play, of mortality and immortality, of the divine in human 'presence' onstage" (Pizzato 1998: 84). For this purpose, theater must be a 'sacred atmosphere,' a '*pathetic* and living [*vivant*] space' (Artaud 1978a: 136. *Italics mine*). It must be a space for 'cruelty'—that is, a 'cosmic rigor' for life, an irresistible passion on the 'transcendental side of action' (Artaud 1978a: 98–99). Theater must stand as a rigorous affirmation of fragile life in the face of brutality and mortality; it is a testament to creation and survival in the hiatus of tragedy (Dumoulié 1992: 67–71; cf. Artaud 1978a: 82–83, 97–100, 110–112, 118, 121).

Artaud believed that tragedy is a 'divine banquet' open to all, although not everyone is prepared to partake in it (Artaud 1935b: 6). Thus, he saw his own affirmation as an act of total obedience to the cruel necessity of life and death, akin to the obedience of a 'hidden God' who, compelled by a vortex of intention (*tourbillon volontaire*), creating good while overcoming evil and darkness (Artaud 1978a: 98–99). It is obvious that Artaud here inherited the Greek conception of tragedy and drama. As Hegel observed, affirmation in Greek tragedies is a forceful valuation that generates conflict (Hegel 1798: 221). In the state of Dionysian enchantment—which is 'the precondition of all dramatic art'—the satyr received mystical visions from the god, with whom he will become one (cf. Nietzsche 1872: 44).

Here, we see that Artaud's affirmation of tragedy is neither a form of pantragism

(closed conflict view that Balthasar associated with Hegelian dramatic), nor a closed tragic view (as Balthasar identified in Nietzschean affirmation; Balthasar 1973: 73, 425–426).

For Balthasar, both pantragism and closed tragic worldview lead not only to the erasure of meaning, but also to the negation of existence and tragedy itself (Balthasar 1973: 430–451). True transcendence must engage with concrete *anagnōrisis* in contingent reality, in ways that are both terrifying and incomprehensible (*unfaßbar*; Balthasar 1952: 56, 126). This engagement is vividly seen in the tragedy of ‘Christ-event,’ where we witness “the Absolute at play with itself” (Balthasar 1973: 66). The cross of the Man of Sorrow is not just ‘the central drama of revelation,’ but also “the primal tragedy that grounds all culture” and “underpins everything in the world that can be termed ‘tragic.’” (Balthasar 1969b: 16; 1973: 429; 1980: 300). The death of the Logos is the epitome of all tragedies, the *aporia* that must never be removed because it is the ‘substantial pathos’ that ‘transcends and gives meaning’ to our own tragedies (Balthasar 1973: 308; 1969b: 52).

The death of the Logos is, for Balthasar, the most astounding tragedy (1969b: 51, 125; 1969a: 14, 216, 232). This tragedy is fundamental for all tragedies because it speaks of the paradox of divine solidarity and abandonment. Christ’s tragic descent is an ‘overarching Christian reality (God on the Cross abandoned by God)’ (Balthasar 1973: 429; cf. 1969a: 224–225) yet, at the same time, the abandoned divine Son shown God’s “solidarity with the dead [...] in a situation of total self-estrangement” (Nichols 1993: 7). Here, we “encounter the mystery of the mighty God whose love was not able to answer his Son when, on the Cross, he cried out for him” (Balthasar 1973: 435).

Recounting Luther, Balthasar interpreted the divine self-abandonment (*opus alienum Dei*) that Christ endured as “the ‘absolute paradox’ which lies in the hiatus” (Balthasar 1969b: 52). The paradox is so absolute that it not only rendered us into spectators (or passive co-actors), but also turned ‘the Word’ into ‘non-Word’ (Balthasar 1969b: 50). The death of the life-giving Word revealed God as ‘*simul vivus et mortuus*’ (Balthasar 1969b: 61). Artaud (1948: 1565) expressed a similar view when he recounted: “l’infini est mort [...] qui n’est pas mort.” Derrida (1967b: 361) later reflected on this line, noting that in God, life and death could intertwine (*se mêler*).

Although Luther’s position might be appropriated into Hegelian dialectics (hence, becoming pantragism), Balthasar insisted that this ‘aporia’ “must at all costs be preserved” (Balthasar 1969b: 52) because it also heralds proper justice (*justitia propria Dei*; Balthasar 1969b: 121). In other words, as Artaud fervently believed, drama must affirm the aporetic nature of tragedy to prevent it from devouring itself into meaninglessness. Tragedy was not a mere depiction of suffering or despair, but a profound confrontation with the vulnerability of human existence. We deserve a proper

space that allows us to grapple with the complexities of life, and to engage with the contradictions, and ambiguities that define our existential struggle. For this reason, Balthasar encouraged us to ‘plumb’ into the ‘abyss of unsurpassable tragedy’ at the Cross, the very space where we can experience ‘grace in the horror of dissolution’ (Balthasar 1976: 84)—a grace that does not shy away from the darkness but embraces and transforms it into goodness and justice.

Conclusion

Accommodating existential struggle in the dramatic is not a simple task. Although Balthasar and Artaud agreed that life is, analogously, a dramatic play (*jeu*), there is ‘an absurd separation’ between life and the stage (Artaud 1978c: 218). In this gap lies the temptation to succumb to the lifeless (*exsangue*) abstraction, such as found in Hegelian dialectics (Derrida 1967b: 362). Abstract resolution as such offers a simplistic answer to the complexities of human existence, and leaves “all tension lost in the ‘one-dimensional’ world” (Balthasar 1976: 85). In this context, Balthasar (1973: 86) sought to ‘prove’ that there is a space for the tragic dimension in the divine drama. This space, as explored here, is found at the cross where Christ, the Logos affirmed suffering and death. From the abyss, His cry out of absolute obedience surges where words falter, transcending the limits of verbal language and logical explanation.

In drama, it is role enactment that embodies the participation in the ineffable mystery of life. The ‘absolute tragedy’ of the cross is the quintessential example of how the forces of action work beyond the constraints of verbal language. At the cross, the banished God embraces humanity’s own state of banishment (*Verweisung*). The banishment and death of the divine Logos is an act of solidarity, the ‘pathless divine abyss for the self’ (Nichols 2000: 78; cf. Balthasar 1976: 284, 307). The divine tragedy is the unbearable reality of suffering that holds space for our existential struggle and inaugurates the possibility of transformation. It is by affirming the agonizing tragedy that His descent “became the ascent of all from the same depths” (Balthasar 1969b: 53). Just as the divine tragedy brings transformation and redemption, Artaud (1979c: 45) saw his illness as a ‘descent’, one from which he longed to ‘reemerge into the daylight’ (*ressortir au jour*).

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