

The Radiant Christ: A Theological Semiotic Critique and Appropriation of Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theology of Revelation and Faith

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Introduction

Hans Urs von Balthasar's understanding of the radiance (*Glanz*) of the form (*Gestalt*) of Christ guides many of his theological maneuvers.¹ Concerned to avoid the downgrading that he thought categorical revelation received especially in Karl Rahner's work, Balthasar doubled down on the indispensability of God's historical revelation in Christ.² If God's revelation is complete, full, and final in Jesus Christ, then this must mean,

¹ On Balthasar's notion of *Gestalt*, see D. C. Schindler, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth: A Philosophical Investigation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 12–17.

² For an instance of Balthasar critiquing Rahner on this point, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, trans. Richard Beckley (Glenrock, NJ: Newman Press, 1968), 60–68. There were, of course, other factors motivating Balthasar's theological aesthetic account of revelation, including the influence of Karl Barth's theology of revelation, the urge to avoid neo-Scholastic extrinsicism, and Balthasar's own formation in the arts. For discussion of such factors, see Mark McInroy, *Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses: Perceiving Splendour*, Changing Paradigms in Historical and Systematic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 167–78; John Kenneth Riches, "Balthasar and the Analysis of Faith," in *The Analogy of Beauty: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. John Kenneth Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986); Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction*, Interventions (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 51–53.

in Balthasar's view, first, that the Christ form contains in itself all that is necessary to effect the conversion of those who encounter it and, second, that God's revelation in Christ is capacious enough to enfold within itself all that God has otherwise communicated and, indeed, the whole of the divine mystery.³ Balthasar employs aesthetics to great effect to explicate these ideas. It is the form of Christ, which is radiant with the divine glory, that captivates and persuades the witness, so that grace and faith can be understood as given in and through the seeing of the form of Christ rather than through a distinct interior motion and generation.⁴ Further, as the work of art possesses unplumbable depths within its very visibility, so much more does the Christ form unveil the infinite, divine mystery precisely in its veiling in the incarnate Christ. The radiance of the form of Christ is the hermeneutical key which governs Balthasar's theologies of revelation and faith.

Balthasar came to profound theological conclusions regarding the form of Christ, especially pertaining to the completeness of God's revelation in Christ and to the manner in which divine mysteries become perceptible in the sensible mediation of revelation. In opposing neo-Platonic influence within the Christian tradition through his appropriation of the transcendental of Beauty, Balthasar showed more than any other contemporary theologian that one approaches God not by getting behind the Christ form, but only by gazing and meditating upon it. Nonetheless, I contend that Balthasar's theology of revelation and faith ultimately generates internal conflicts rooted in his construal of the radiance of the Christ form. To take a key example to which I will dedicate more attention in what follows: as much as Balthasar asserts that faith is a prerequisite for understanding revelation in Christ, the fact that faith is generated through the seeing of the Christ form itself results in a viciously circular relation between revelation and faith in Balthasar's theology. Faith is both a prerequisite to and a product of the seeing.⁵ Although I take there to be grounds

³ It is this capacious whole that constitutes the Christ form and that, as Balthasar's trilogy itself performatively manifests, can be approached from many particular angles insofar as they belong to the one *Gestalt*. See John Riches, "Von Balthasar as Biblical Theologian and Exegete," *New Blackfriars* 79, no. 923 (1998): 38–45; Breandán Leahy, "Theological Aesthetics," in *The Beauty of Christ: A Introduction to the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Bede MacGregor and Thomas J. Norris (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 29–41.

⁴ Leahy, "Theological Aesthetics," 43.

⁵ It is, of course, legitimate for there to be mutual fecundation between faith as a habit and the seeing of the form. As will be discussed, my concern is specifically with the dynamics of the *initium fidei* in Balthasar's theology.

within Balthasar's own thought for critiquing his account of revelation in Christ, I will argue that the ultimate basis for the internal conflicts is his problematic semiotic assumptions.

Nevertheless, I do not think that Balthasar's fundamental insights regarding the radiance and capaciousness of the form of Christ need be or should be dispensed with, and I will argue that it is precisely by employing a more robust account of semiotics that Balthasar's insights can be rehabilitated and appropriated. The argument will proceed in three main parts: (1) I will offer an account of Balthasar's understanding of the radiance of the form of Christ and how it shapes his accounts of grace, faith, and revelation of the divine mystery; (2) this will be followed by discussion of the grounds for my critique of Balthasar, first by highlighting the consistency issues internal to his theology and then by demonstrating the semiotic origin of those conflicts; (3) I will offer a summary account of how a more robust semiotics can provide the proper foundation for Balthasar's insights regarding the radiance of the Christ form. Due to the nature of the argument, a lot of time will have to be spent up front discussing Balthasar's theology of revelation and faith in itself and then laying down the semiotic principles to be employed in the critique and appropriation. I therefore ask the reader to be patient in allowing the purchase of the argument come into view.

The Radiance of the Christ Form

Although it was intentionally placed subsequent to his theology of revelation, Balthasar's natural cognitional theory, developed in the first volume of the *Theo-Logic*, provides a helpful point of comparison to his theology of revelation.⁶ Balthasar conceives of the essence and appearance of the particular material thing as interpenetrating, such that one never leaves behind the appearance after attaining the abstracted essence, nor apprehends the essence except through the appearance.⁷ In a "mutual surrender between image and essence," the essence of the thing "expresses" itself to a human subject in and through its appearances, and then the appearances

⁶ I have semiotic concerns with Balthasar's cognitional theory as well that will be incidentally touched upon in the following, but dedicated discussion of those is outside the scope of this article.

⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic I: Truth of the World*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 139. See also Schindler, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 175–88; Aidan Nichols, *Say It Is Pentecost: A Guide Through Balthasar's Logic* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 37–41.

“retreat” into the essence in order to make the nature of the thing manifest to the subject.⁸

Rather than foregrounding the idea that abstraction renders actually intelligible the only potentially intelligible phantasm, Balthasar places the emphasis decisively on the object’s *free* unveiling within the knowing subject.⁹ Indeed, the object “overpoweringly manifests itself” to the knower, though the knowing subject does have to make interior space to receive the gift of the object in its fullness.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the object remains fundamentally mysterious even in its unveiling. This is not, however, because there is some residue of the object’s constitution which remains to be revealed; the infinite depth of the object is itself manifest in the appearances of the object, or else the appearances would not really be the adequate expression of the object’s essence.¹¹ As Balthasar puts it, “things are unveiled as veiled.”¹²

The Persuasive Form of Christ

It should be noted that there are, for our purposes, three elements of Balthasar’s natural cognitional theory that are transposed into his account of revelation in Christ.¹³ First, as the appearances of a material thing constitute the complete expression of the thing’s essence, so too does Christ’s humanity fully express his divinity. Second, as the object of natural cognition takes the initiative in unveiling itself to the knowing subject, the Christ form similarly lays hold of the witness to God’s self-disclosure. Third, as the finite appearances manifest the infinite depth of the material thing,

⁸ Balthasar, *Theo-Logic I*, 149–150. See also Rino Fisichella, “Fundamentaltheologisches bei Hans Urs von Balthasar,” in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: Gestalt und Werk*, ed. Karl Lehmann and Walter Kasper (Cologne: Communio, 1989), 301. Please note that all translations from modern non-English sources that have not been attributed in citation are my own.

⁹ Regarding the freedom of the object’s unveiling, see Balthasar, *Theo-Logic I*, 81.

¹⁰ Balthasar, *Theo-Logic I*, 82. Balthasar conceives of knowing as a kind of intimate communion between knower and known, which is why Nichols calls the meeting of the two a “philosophical marriage feast” (*Sat It Is Pentecost*, 21).

¹¹ Balthasar, *Theo-Logic I*, 88. Schindler makes this point with respect to Balthasar’s understanding of *Gestalt* in comparison to the concept of form in other metaphysical systems (*Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 173–74). Regarding the development of Balthasar’s understanding of *Gestalt* from his earlier conception of metaphysical form employed in *Theo-Logic I*, see 167–78.

¹² Balthasar, *Theo-Logic I*, 205.

¹³ On the analogous relation between revelation of metaphysical form and revelation of God in Christ, see Larry S. Chapp, *The God Who Speaks: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theology of Revelation* (San Francisco: International Scholars, 1996), 121–24.

so also does the Christ form fully manifest the infinite divine mystery in the form's visibility.

Although the Second Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* affirmed it as a truth of the Christian faith that God's revelation in Christ is complete, Balthasar's claim about Christ's humanity being the full expression of God's self has more extensive constructive theological implications. Balthasar's point is to advance something like Matthias Joseph Scheeben's account of the "admixture" and *perichoresis* between Christ's two natures.¹⁴ As essence and appearance interpenetrate in the material thing, so does Christ's divinity infuse and radiate from his humanity. There is no "getting behind" Christ's humanity in attaining to his divinity, and there is nothing of his divinity not manifest in his humanity.¹⁵

As the work of art, when rightly approached, lays hold of the viewer, rather than the viewer bestowing or projecting meaning upon it, the Christ form is arresting, persuasive, and transformative of the one who sees the form.¹⁶ Balthasar follows Barth in prioritizing the evidential power intrinsic to the historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ over any anthropological conditions predisposing the human person to reception of revelation.¹⁷ Revelation occurs by God's initiative. If the particular material thing "overwhelmingly manifests itself" to the human knower, then so much more is God's revelation in Christ imposing: like the sun, "what

¹⁴ Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics: Book Five: Soteriology: Part One: The Person of Christ the Redeemer*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2020), 253–76.

¹⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics I: Seeing the Form*, ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 425. As Louis Dupré puts it, "What remains concealed in him (his divinity) has not been withdrawn from manifestation, but rather *manifests* the inscrutable, divine mystery itself. As in the work of art, no ulterior reality hides *behind* the form: the form, totally manifest, adduces its own evidential power" ("The Glory of the Lord: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991], 199).

¹⁶ Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord I*, 453–54.

¹⁷ McInroy argues against Noel O'Donaghue that it is nonetheless wrong to interpret Balthasar as understanding the subject as purely passive in receiving revelation (*Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses*, 182). McInroy is undoubtedly right in noting Balthasar's urge to preserve participation. It seems to me, however, that O'Donaghue is correct in claiming that Balthasar is "on a razor edge" between including active human participation and conceiving of the subject as purely passive recipient of divine action, and that more often than not Balthasar inclines toward the latter ("A Theology of Beauty," in Riches, *Analogy of Beauty*, 3).

dazzles to the point of blinding is precisely what is most perfectly evident and which is met with a violent negation.”¹⁸

God’s glory is fully manifest in Christ, and, since “things are unveiled as veiled,” it is fitting that Christ’s crucifixion is the moment at which the glory of the Lord is most radiant in the form of Christ.¹⁹ Far from the Kierkegaardian notion of God’s indirect communication in Christ, Balthasar thinks the very intra-Trinitarian relations become *visible* in the Son’s obedience to the Father on the Cross.²⁰ Were God’s infinitude and mystery not displayed in the visible form of Christ crucified, then, in Balthasar’s view, it would not be possible truly to affirm that Christ is the fullness of God’s revelation.²¹

Grace and Faith in Light of the Radiant Form of Christ

If the Christ form is intrinsically evident in its radiance, then this implies, to Balthasar’s mind, that there cannot be any necessary element to the human subject’s apprehension and appropriation of God’s communication in Christ that is distinct from Christ’s manifestation itself. The necessity of a distinct supplemental movement would suggest that God’s revelation in the Christ form is in some way lacking. This is the premise that governs Balthasar’s treatment of grace and faith.

Where the grace of justification is treated by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, for example, as involving an internal movement of the sinner’s will distinct from sensation of the sensible mediation of divine revelation, Balthasar enfoldes grace into the way in which the manifestation of the Christ form lays hold of human subjects. Similarly, the light of faith by which one assents to the form of Christ flows forth from the form of Christ itself.²² Balthasar does develop the idea of a theological *a priori*, which is an innate, graced openness to receiving the light of faith from Christ. He is clear, however, that this does not constitute a tendency

¹⁸ Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord I*, 498. See also Fisichella, “Fundamentaltheologisches,” 305.

¹⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory III: The Dramatis Personae: The Person of Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 136.

²⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics VII: Theology: The New Covenant*, ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 232–43.

²¹ Aidan Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide Through Balthasar’s Aesthetics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 232–43.

²² See Dupré, “Glory of the Lord,” 197: “Revelation itself radiates the light in which we see its form.”

toward or an anthropological predisposition for faith: "But in man's turning to Christ what shines forth is not man's own aptitude for faith, but rather Christ's aptitude to give to the inept a share in his own light and power."²³

The drift of Balthasar's understanding of grace can be helpfully expounded by looking at his discussion of Augustine and Pelagius in *Theo-Drama IV*. Balthasar propounds that the achievement of Augustine over and against Pelagius is that he established that finite freedom is no more than a precondition for participation in the divine life.²⁴ It is noteworthy that Balthasar does not identify Augustine's *non posse non peccare* or his claims about the need for an internal movement of justifying grace as achievements over Pelagius. While Balthasar is critical of Pelagius's reduction of Christ to mere *exemplum*, he does offer a subtle defense of Pelagius in response to Augustine's "one-sidedness":

Again, [for Pelagius] Christ remains primarily the *exemplum*, not in a purely external sense, but in the way a significant model is able powerfully to transform our inner orientation toward God. . . . In Pelagius, these two sides are skillfully balanced between determinism and indeterminism, since the original gift of grace whereby man possesses the ability to act freely [*posse*] is only "blocked," not withdrawn. But is this not simply how it is?²⁵

It becomes clear when this is read in light of Balthasar's understanding of the radiant form of Christ that Balthasar needs to rehabilitate aspects of Pelagius's thought and synthesize them with Augustine's achievement in his own account of grace. Balthasar will not admit, as Augustine does, of an interior movement of grace distinct from the seeing of the form of Christ.²⁶ Balthasar does not reduce Christ solely to an *exemplum* but he does integrate the movement of grace that Augustine thought was necessary for (to put it in Balthasar's terms) finite freedom to participate in infinite freedom into the form of Christ.²⁷ In this way, according to Augustine's demands,

²³ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 175.

²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory IV: The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 380.

²⁵ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama IV*, 377.

²⁶ Leahy, "Theological Aesthetics," 45.

²⁷ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 149. See also Kevin Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Irenaean Retrieval* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 111: "The internal logic of von Balthasar's entire theology is committed to the principle that

Christ is recognized as *exemplum et sacramentum* and grace is maintained as a precondition for conversion, but Pelagius's idea that the image of Christ itself can save human persons without a distinct inner movement of grace is preserved as well. The grace necessary for receiving revelation in Christ is enfolded into the radiant form of Christ.

Balthasar's understanding of faith falls in line with his account of grace. Faith is not generated through an interior grace, but is given by the radiance of the Christ form: "The light of faith stems from the object which, revealing itself to the subject, draws it out beyond itself (otherwise it would not be faith) into the sphere of the object."²⁸ At the same time, Balthasar is resolute in claiming that faith is a prerequisite for understanding God's revelation, even as it is bestowed in and through the form of Christ.²⁹ One must respond to Christ with faith in order to participate in the form and thereby receive understanding, but it is Christ's form itself that enlightens the witness in such a way as to make her capable of seeing the form.³⁰

Balthasar takes faith to grant the human person the capacity to see and to know God in the fullness of God's mystery.³¹ Faith therefore grounds a participation in the very life of God, but, to Balthasar's thinking, if that is so, then faith must be antecedently and more fully present in the life of the Trinity. There is a kind of faith that the Son possesses in relation to the Father, and that faith is manifested in Christ's obedience to the Father in his death on the Cross.³² The visibility of the Son's faith in the Christ form

sensory reality, and only sensory reality, communicates grace."; see also Dupré, "Glory of the Lord," 197.

²⁸ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 175. See also Louis Roberts, *The Theological Aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 201–2; Chapp, *God Who Speaks*, 142–45.

²⁹ Chapp, *God who Speaks*—136.

³⁰ Both aspects, the priority and the posteriority of faith, can be seen in Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 211: "To be sure, only faith, through its light is able to discover this radiant transparency of God's manifestation in Christ and in the Church. Where, for other unenlightened eyes, there seem to stand intermediary figures as obstacles, there precisely it is that faith perceives its own light within the form of revelation. Indeed, stated more fully and exactly: it is precisely in looking at the form of revelation that faith becomes luminous to itself and understands the genuine *ekstasis* of love demanded by God. . . . This is precisely the light that God has implanted in the world and that is capable of awakening in me faith in God."

³¹ Riches claims that Balthasar attempted to attenuate the contrast between the beatific vision and faith because he deemed it to be more consistent with the biblical treatment of faith as a participation in God's glory ("Balthasar and the Analysis of Faith," 47).

³² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory V: The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 95–98.

functions as the source of the human person's faith and thereby grants participation in the Son's faith.³³

In order to account for the possibility of this sensation of the "super-sensual" in and through the sensible, Balthasar develops an account of the spiritual senses.³⁴ Balthasar states that the spiritual senses are bestowed through grace. He does not as explicitly enfold the bestowal of the spiritual senses into the radiance of the Christ form, but as previously discussed, it is clear that the grace which generates the spiritual senses is given through seeing the Christ form.³⁵ Furthermore, Balthasar emphasizes that the corporeal senses have to undergo a kind of death and resurrection in order to be elevated to spiritual sensation, a death and resurrection that is precipitated by seeing the form of Christ.³⁶

The Transposition of the Analogia Entis

Balthasar holds to the definitive legitimacy of the *analogia entis*, though he is critical of a certain interpretation of it that he considers overly influenced by neo-Platonism. Specifically, Balthasar claims of the *analogia entis* as advanced by figures such as Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, Søren Kierkegaard, and Erich Przywara: "It is hard to see how such an understanding of analogy can sustain a Christology."³⁷ This tradition of interpretation of the *analogia entis*, according to Balthasar, construes the mystery of God as hidden behind the Christ form rather than as manifest within it. Balthasar's strategy is to transpose the *analogia entis* according to his aesthetic account of revelation. The *maior dissimilitudo* of the *analogia entis* must therefore be visible within the *similitudo* of the Christ form.

Balthasar understands the difference between Creator and creature, as well as difference among creatures, to have its origin in the intra-Trinitarian distance between the Father and the Son.³⁸ Unlike in neo-Platonism,

³³ See Chapp, *God who Speaks*, 125–27.

³⁴ Balthasar's account of the spiritual senses helps him avoid naturalizing perception of the Christ form (see *Glory of the Lord I*, 356–418).

³⁵ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 241–43. McInroy emphasizes the need for the corporeal senses to be remade by grace in order to perceive the glory of the Christ form (*Balthasar*, 178). But he does not account for the fact that grace is received through seeing. The issue of circularity will be discussed below.

³⁶ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 397–98.

³⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic II: Truth of God*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 94–95.

³⁸ Nicholas J. Healy, *The Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar: Being as Communion*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 82–88.

creation is not the product of some fall; the difference of creation is a reflection of a kind of difference within the Godhead itself.³⁹ It is this distance between the Father and the Son that is manifest in the Father's abandonment of the Son on the Cross and that overcomes the alienation of sin.⁴⁰

Balthasar transposes the *maior dissimilitudo* of the *analogia entis* to this distance between the Father and the Son in the Son's alienation on the Cross. After all, all difference has its origin in and is enveloped by this distance.⁴¹ Due to the fact that this distance is an expression of the intra-Trinitarian distance between the Father and the Son, the moment of the Son's greatest distance from the Father in his mission is also the moment of greatest manifestation of the inner life of the triune God. The *maior dissimilitudo* of the *analogia entis*, therefore, does not function as an apophatic negation following some predication of *similitudo* between God and creature. Such an understanding of the *analogia entis* would entail that there is something of God not manifest in the Christ form itself. Instead, for Balthasar, the sensible disclosure of the *maxima dissimilitudo* in the Father's abandonment of the Son constitutes the *maxima similitudo* to God's own life for human vision and understanding.⁴²

The Drama of the "No" to Christ

The foregoing discussions of the persuasiveness and capaciousness of the radiant Christ form raise the question of how it is possible for anyone to deny that God is revealed in Christ. Balthasar not only reckons with the historical fact of negative reactions to Christ, but claims over and above

³⁹ Balthasar, *Theo-Logic II*, 184–86.

⁴⁰ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama IV*, 317–426; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols, O.P. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 168–81.

⁴¹ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama III*, 220–29; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory II: Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), 270. See also Manfred Lochbrunner, *Analogia Caritatis: Darstellung und Deutung der Theologie Hans Urs von Balthasars*, Freiburger Theologische Studien 120 (Freiburg: Herder, 1981), 295; Healy, *The Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 129–37.

⁴² See Balthasar, *Theo-Drama III*, 229: "There is nothing 'as if' about this: the outcome is that he [the Son] is forsaken by God on the Cross. Yes this 'infinite distance,' which recapitulates the sinner's mode of alienation from God, will remain forever the highest revelation known to the world of the diastasis (within the eternal being of God) between the Father and Son in the Holy Spirit." See also Angela Franz Franks, "Trinitarian *Analogia Entis* in Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Thomist* 62, no. 4 (1998): 533–59. See also Balthasar's enfolding of the apophatic into the kataphatic (*Theo-Logic II*, 108–22; Mongrain, *Systematic Thought*, 56; Chapp, *God Who Speaks*, 109–10).

this that the “No” to Christ on humanity’s part intensifies as history progresses.⁴³ The “No” human persons utter to Christ is not a product of any deficiency in the intrinsic evidence of the radiant Christ form; it is one conceivable natural response to that which overwhelms: recall, “what dazzles to the point of blinding is precisely what is most perfectly evident and which is met with a violent negation. . . . The true scandal is the arrogant attitude that opposes one’s subjective opinion to the objective evidence.”⁴⁴ In effect, the negative response that Christ receives is itself a manifestation of the evidential power of the form—the rejection of Christ dialectically displays Christ’s persuasiveness.

The Christ form is capacious enough to absorb this ever-intensifying “No” that human persons answer to it. Since the Son’s alienation from the Father on the Cross represents a distance greater than which none can be conceived, the entire drama of the human rejection of Christ throughout history exists within that distance and is overcome by the Son’s return to the Father after his alienation on the Cross.⁴⁵ The Son’s alienation on the Cross is not only Balthasar’s attempt at a soteriological explanation for the efficacy of Christ’s salvific work, though it is that. It is also a matter of the completion of God’s revelation in Christ; the rejection of Christ belongs to and manifests the radiance of the crucified Christ in whom that rejection is overcome.

A Critique of Balthasar’s Account of Revelation in Christ

Interior Conflict

While there are a number of points in Balthasar’s theology discussed thus far that one might dispute, my critique of Balthasar’s theology of revelation in Christ will focus on his understanding of faith, though the other points discussed will remain pertinent. The basic problem is the one mentioned in the introduction—that there is a vicious circularity to Balthasar’s theology of faith. On the one hand, he affirms faith is a prerequisite to seeing the form; on the other, he claims that the Christ form itself bestows faith

⁴³ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama IV*, 338.

⁴⁴ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 498. Balthasar’s use of “objective” and “subjective” are typical, but I find them to be philosophically problematic. This issue will be touched upon below in the “Semiotic Interlude” of the following section.

⁴⁵ See Balthasar, *Theo-Drama IV*, 329: “We must remember that the creature’s No, its wanting to be autonomous without acknowledging its origin, must be located within the Son’s all-embracing Yes to the Father, in the Spirit.”

on the witness. What is ontologically prior: the seeing of the form, or the bestowal of faith?⁴⁶

Balthasar is, of course, not oblivious to the issue. He knows that Augustine and many who followed him posited God's gracious movement of the will in generating the act of faith precisely because faith was understood as an absolute prerequisite to reception of revelation, and circularity was to be avoided. But Balthasar's approach is to "circle" about the mysteries of the faith rather than to provide rigorous systematization, and there is no doubt that Balthasar's sense that faith is somehow bestowed by the radiance of the Christ form proceeds from his own meditative practice of doing "kneeling theology."⁴⁷ Relatedly, Balthasar shows himself to be more interested in giving an account of the continuous spiritual journey into faith than in a clear articulation of the ontological dynamics of the *initium fidei*.

That said, appreciation for this approach does not make the conflict disappear, and one can witness Balthasar wrestling with it himself. Time and again, he is forced to choose either prioritizing the fact that faith is a prerequisite to reception of revelation or holding thoroughly to the persuasiveness of the form, and he consistently opts for the latter. After raising the question at hand quite explicitly, Balthasar responds:

Superficially considered, this faith can appear to the spirit accustomed to psychological deductions to be its own achievement. But once it truly realizes the act of faith, the spirit immediately understands that this act is grace—a being drawn by God, an overcoming of its own impotence by the power of Christ, an overcoming also of all its subjective, self-projective anticipation of human thought and imagination by the wholly different clarity and evidence that stems from the thing itself.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Chapp warns against seeking this kind of ordering (*God Who Speaks*, 140–42). Balthasar is clearly interested in portraying the communication of revelation as occurring through the aesthetic meeting of subject and object, which is partially why seeking an ordering may seem out of place, but the combination of two things (discussed below) makes the question unavoidable: (1) that Balthasar is insistent that the reception of revelation occurs by graced capacities (faith and the spiritual senses); (2) that grace, and therefore faith and the spiritual senses, is bestowed sensually through the Christ form.

⁴⁷ On Balthasar's method, see Larry Chapp, "Revelation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11–15.

⁴⁸ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 184–85, 208–12.

Most of this quotation could have been written by any thoroughgoing Augustinian, but the final line puts the whole decisively back into a Balthasarian frame. In the end, the persuasive radiance of the form is the guiding principle.

The consequence of Balthasar's option, however, is that faith ends up being no more than a nominal entity.⁴⁹ To be sure, Balthasar attributes profound effects to faith—as mentioned, various elements of the Christian's participation in the life of the Trinity are grounded in faith. But the question is whether faith has sufficient definition in its own right in Balthasar's theology for it to make sense to attribute such effects to faith. Is not participation in the life of the Trinity generated by seeing the form of Christ? If it is unclear how faith is actually a prerequisite to seeing the form of Christ, since faith is a product of seeing the form, then is it not consequently unclear how participation in the life of the Trinity follows upon faith? Since faith is effectively appropriated to seeing the form in Balthasar's theology, faith lacks a formal object of its own distinct from the formal object of seeing.⁵⁰ Without its own formal object, faith lacks definition as a distinct habit or disposition. And if faith is effectively a nominal entity, then all the effects Balthasar attributes to faith are actually the effects of a power or habit that has its own formal object: seeing.⁵¹

Now, Balthasar's distinction between radiance (*Glanz*) and form (*Gestalt*) might suggest that the light emanating from the Christ form, distinct from the sensible light by which things are corporeally seen, is the formal object by which the form is seen. But, if this is the case, there still

⁴⁹ Balthasar claims that neo-Scholastic rationalism and modernism alike hold that, "if the mystery were visible as such in the signs themselves, then faith would be abolished" (*Glory of the Lord I*, 146). And his rebuttal is that his aesthetic theory of revelation, which unites sign and signified in the one form of Christ, overcomes those two positions and their common objection. However, the fact that Balthasar ultimately construes faith as a form of seeing suggests the legitimacy of the objection. On Balthasar's attempts to avoid these extremes, see Chapp, *God Who Speaks*, 136–45; Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, 31; Fisichella, "Fundamentaltheologisches," 306.

⁵⁰ Balthasar does speak as if God is the formal object of faith, but he ultimately elides that formality to the formality of seeing: "Moreover, in view of the nature of the reality involved, the human beholder can be brought to such perception only by the grace of God, that is, by a participation in this same depth that makes him proportionate to the wholly new dimension of a form-phenomenon which comprises within itself both God and world" (*Glory of the Lord I*, 149).

⁵¹ McNroy argues that, for Balthasar, "seeing spiritually is believing" (*Balthasar*, 174). He also claims that the corporeal senses have to be transfigured by grace in order for the spiritual senses to be generated (184). But he neglects the essential point that grace is given through seeing the Christ form.

needs to be an organ by which the form can be received. Thus, Balthasar assimilates faith to the spiritual senses. The spiritual senses are generated by grace, but grace is received through seeing the Christ form.⁵² Balthasar is, of course, correct to say that one receives grace through meditation on the Christ form, and that grace capacitates one to see the form more intimately. That this is the case within the Christian life is indisputable; the problem pertains to the *initium fidei*. If the grace that supplies one with the spiritual senses as the organs receptive of the form is received by seeing the form, then the form must initially be attainable via the corporeal senses, which brings us back to the reduction of the formal object of faith to the formal object of corporeal sight (or corporeal sensation generally). But this conclusion is repugnant to Balthasar's theological principles, especially his insistence that faith is necessary for seeing the form and that the theological *a priori* is not an aptitude for faith.

This raises a further conflict. Balthasar's theology is deeply concerned with the issue of freedom, with much of the second volume of the *Theo-Drama* dedicated to the relationship between finite and infinite freedom.⁵³ Balthasar's account of the persuasive form of Christ was undoubtedly intended to circumvent issues pertaining to grace and freedom—by enfold-ing grace into the form of Christ, it seems one is able to avoid the whole issue of how grace can move a person freely.⁵⁴ After all, the one who is compelled by a work of art is overtaken by it without one's freedom being violated. Yet, because Balthasar holds to the radical intrinsic radiance and persuasiveness of the Christ form, the issue dialectically returns. Does one who looks away from the sun because one is blinded do so freely? Does one freely assent to that which is "perfectly evident"?⁵⁵ If one's rejection of Christ is an element of the radiance of the form itself, is such rejection free?⁵⁶

A Semiotic Interlude

Semiotics is the study of the nature and action of signs. Not to be confused with structuralist semiology, semiotics has its roots in Augustine's claim

⁵² Again, see Mongrain, *Systematic Thought*, 111: "The internal logic of von Balthasar's entire theology is committed to the principle that sensory reality, and only sensory reality, communicates grace."

⁵³ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama II*, 189–334.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 135–36.

⁵⁵ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 498.

⁵⁶ On the possibility that Balthasar undercuts the existential tensions of human experience through seeking resolution in the imposition of the form, see Ben Quash, "'Between the Brutely Given, and the Brutally, Banally Free': Von Balthasar's Theology of Drama in Dialogue with Hegel," *Modern Theology* 13, no. 3 (July 1997): 309–11.

that both conventional signs, such as words are to concepts and things, and natural signs, such as smoke is to fire, are species of the genus "sign."⁵⁷ This means that, whatever a sign is, it is equally at work in culture and in nature.⁵⁸ Indeed, it will later become clear through the contributions of the seventeenth-century Dominican John of St. Thomas (John Poinsett) and that of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce that all of cognition, whether of the real or of the constructed, occurs through semiosis. While there was much semiotic progress throughout Latin Scholasticism, it is only in John of St. Thomas's *Tractatus de signis* that the nature of the sign receives adequate systematization to realize Augustine's proposal.⁵⁹

John of St. Thomas claimed that the sign is a triadic relation, properly speaking: a relation between a fundamen and a terminus with an additional, indirect terminus in the cognitive power of the one grasping the sign.⁶⁰ This is a conclusion that ends up returning, apparently without any direct influence, in the work of Peirce: "A *Sign*, or *Representamen*, is a First which stands in such a genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its *Object*, as to be capable of determining a Third, called its *Interpretant*, to assume the same triadic relation to its Object in which it stands itself to the same object."⁶¹ The triadic relation of the sign is one relation, not multi-

⁵⁷ Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* 1.1–2, in *Teaching Christianity*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, Works of Saint Augustine 1/11 (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2007), 129. See also Umberto Eco et al., "Latratu Canis, or: The Dog's Barking," in *Frontiers in Semiotics*, ed. John Deely, Brooke Williams, and Felicia E. Kruse, Advances in Semiotics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 65. Semiology has positive contributions to make to semiotics, but John Deely makes clear that it needs to be situated within the broader doctrine of semiotics as also concerned with non-linguistic signs and requires reconfiguration according to the triadic nature of the sign (*Four Ages of Understanding: The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001], 669–88).

⁵⁸ John Deely, *Purely Objective Reality*, Semiotics, Communication and Cognition 4 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 176.

⁵⁹ The story of these developments through medieval thought is told most fully in Deely, *Four Ages*, 212–484.

⁶⁰ John Poinsett (John of St. Thomas), *Tractatus de signis: The Semiotic of John Poinsett*, trans. John Deely, 2nd ed. (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2013), 154–59. Robert Markus claims that the triadic characterization of the sign is already in Augustine ("St. Augustine on Signs," *Phronesis* 2, no. 1 [1957]: 71–72).

⁶¹ Charles S. Peirce, "The Icon, Index, and Symbol" in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* [CP], ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1960), 2.274 (by convention in Peirce scholarship: volume.paragraph).

ple dyadic relations working in concert.⁶² The key is John of St. Thomas's notion that there is an indirect terminus (the interpretant) in the cognitive power—this indirect terminus brings the mind into the relation between the sign-vehicle and the object.⁶³

What Peirce calls a "sign" in his above definition is typically referred to as a "sign-vehicle" in contemporary semiotic scholarship, since a sign properly speaking is the whole triadic relation. The sign-vehicle is simply one term of a sign, specifically that term which does the standing for another. It was recognized early on in Latin debates about the sign that even immaterial things such as concepts, because they stand for objects (albeit *formally*, not instrumentally), are sign-vehicles, and Peirce later expanded upon the range of semiosis by demonstrating that anything can function as a sign-vehicle.⁶⁴ The second term of the sign, the object, is that for which a sign-vehicle stands. A stop sign has the action of braking as its object, a word spoken to me has my interlocutor's idea as its object, and my concept of a dog has a dog as its object. The third term, the interpretant, refers not so much to the one who interprets a sign-vehicle, but rather to that through which one interprets a sign-vehicle. Thus, it is through my understanding of what a stop sign means that I am capable of recognizing it as a sign-vehicle standing for the socially imposed object; this understanding is the interpretant. Traditionally, concepts were the only interpretants acknowledged, but through the work of Peirce, as developed in contemporary semiotics, semioticians have come to recognize that emotions, dispositions, and reflexive reactions also function as interpretants.⁶⁵

Now, the idea that a sign is a kind of relation was not new in John of St. Thomas—it was clear to prior ancient and medieval thinkers that a sign involved one thing standing for another via some kind of relation.⁶⁶ John

⁶² On the irreducibility of triadic relations to dyadic relations, see Peirce, "Guess" (CP, 1.363).

⁶³ The third element of the sign is named the "interpretant" only by Peirce, though John of St. Thomas's understanding of the indirect terminus is complementary to Peirce's concept of interpretant.

⁶⁴ The debates were complicated by the fact that Augustine had defined the sign as sensible. Nevertheless, as Deely shows, Roger Bacon, Thomas Aquinas, and John Duns Scotus all seemed to recognize at various points that concepts should indeed be considered sign-vehicles (Deely, *Four Ages*, 331–85, see also Peirce, "Signs and their Objects" (CP, 2.230).

⁶⁵ John Deely, *Purely Objective Reality*, 75–79; Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, *Semiotics Unbounded: Interpretive Routes through the Open Network of Signs* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 8–10.

⁶⁶ See, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] III, q. 60, a. 1; see also Markus, "St.

of St. Thomas's claim, however, had two innovations: first, his account of what it means for the sign to be one relation with three terms; second, his understanding of the type of relation that constitutes the sign. The Latin debates regarding the nature of relations prior to John of St. Thomas were complex, and discussion of them is certainly beyond the scope of this argument.⁶⁷ It will be sufficient for our purposes to note the crux of John's account of relations.

He considers *relationes secundum esse* (ontological relations) to be indifferent in their nature as relations to being founded in *entia realia* or in *entia rationis*. In other words, relations of reason and real relations, though analogical in being, are both univocally ontological relations because they are univocally characterized as *esse ad*, or being toward.⁶⁸ The only thing, ontologically speaking, that distinguishes real relations from relations of reason is that the former possess real non-relational characteristics as their terms where the latter do not. Consider an example: a man hopes to marry the woman he loves. The spousal relation that he imagines existing between them is a relation of reason, since it is not founded in the man and woman as subjects. Eventually, they get married. The same relation that previously existed only in the man's mind is now a real relation, since it now possesses as terms characteristics really belonging to the man and woman. After many happy years together, the man passes away. The woman holds the spousal relation in her memory, but the relation is no longer real. According to John of St. Thomas, the relation in its *esse ad* is indifferent to existence in the mind or in the real and is therefore a *relatio secundum esse* (an ontological relation) whether in the real or of reason.

This account of relations is the backbone of John's semiotics.⁶⁹ For, if a sign is a relation, as many had recognized, then the only way that Augustine's proposal regarding the univocal application of "sign" to conventional and natural signs alike could be realized is if both conventional and natural signs are also equally relations. A natural sign, such as smoke, is a sign of its cause because there is a mind-independent fundament that founds a real

Augustine on Signs," 60–72

⁶⁷ For the various high Scholastic positions that set the terms for later debates, see Mark G. Henninger, *Relations: Medieval Theories 1250–325* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989). For an account of the issue from a semiotic view, see Deely, *Four Ages*, especially chs. 6–10.

⁶⁸ Poinsett, *Tractatus de signis*, 91–95. See also John Deely, *Intentionality and Semiotics: A Story of Mutual Fecundation*, Approaches to Postmodernity 1 (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2007), 171–84.

⁶⁹ For a discussion of why this account of relations is also the essential foundation for realism and the ground of the possibility of social construction, see Deely, *Intentionality and Semiotics*, 133–36.

relation to its cause. A conventional sign is a sign because social imposition founds a relation of reason to its object.⁷⁰ John of St. Thomas's conception of ontological relations as indifferent in their *esse ad* to existence in the real versus existence in reason provides the necessary ontological condition for natural and conventional signs both to be signs.⁷¹

John Deely suggests that John of St. Thomas was the master of the being of signs and Peirce the master of the action of signs.⁷² Peirce's semiotic breakthrough came in his essay entitled "On a New List of Categories," in which he attempted to transcend both Aristotle's categories, which applied only to *entia realia*, and Kant's categories, which aimed to enumerate the a priori structures of the mind in its construction of *entia rationis*.⁷³ Since semiotics, per Augustine's proposal, transcends the division between *entia realia* and *entia rationis* (without confusing them), Peirce's categories likewise apply to both orders. The three bedrock categories of Peirce's thought, which he understood to have ubiquitous application, are "firstness," "secondness," and "thirdness." A first, or that possessing firstness, is "that whose being is simply in itself, not referring to anything nor lying behind anything."⁷⁴ Secondness, which presupposes firstness, designates "that which is what it is by force of something to which it is second."⁷⁵ Two billiard balls, immediately in themselves, would each be firsts, and the impact of the one on the other would be an instance of secondness. Thirdness refers to that which is vis-à-vis mediation between two things or objects. My recognition that both billiard balls are spheres occurs through thirdness because the category of "sphere" mediates between the two, and this occurs not through a mere dyadic relation, or a second, as in the case of the two balls hitting each other, but through the employment of a third mediating factor that connects the two within my understanding. Semiosis occurs though thirdness, since a sign-vehicle stands for an object through

⁷⁰ Poinset, *Tractatus de Signis*, 141.

⁷¹ Deely, *Four Ages*, 430–35.

⁷² John Deely, *Semiotic Animal* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2010), 50.

⁷³ Deely, *Four Ages*, 644–45.

⁷⁴ Peirce, "Guess" (*CP*, 1.356). Firstness is a category quite difficult to become clear on, and I employ it according to only the simplest possible meaning here. Deely argues that the category of firstness is best understood as convertible with Aquinas's understanding of *ens primum cognitum* (*Four Ages*, 645–60). For further discussion of the categories more generally, see Cheryl Misak, "Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914)," in *The Cambridge Companion to Peirce*, ed. Cheryl Misak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19–23.

⁷⁵ Peirce, "Guess" (*CP*, 1.356).

the mediation of an interpretant.⁷⁶ Putting aside the question of the broader validity of Peirce's categories, the essential point for our purposes is that Peirce and John of St. Thomas both recognize that semiosis is constituted by triadic relations.

Furthermore, John of St. Thomas and Peirce agree that cognition occurs through semiosis all the way down. This idea gets framed somewhat differently by the two figures, but there are many complements due to two facts: that John of St. Thomas developed his cognitional theory primarily in commenting on Aquinas, and that Peirce's philosophy of mind was heavily influenced by the Scholastics, especially Scotus.⁷⁷ Signs are necessary in cognition because things cannot be in the human mind according to their own mode of existence.⁷⁸ It is therefore necessary for there to be mediation between knower and object, a mediation that is achieved through thirdness.⁷⁹ Such is why, in brief, the subjective-objective dichotomy, which arose only in modernity, especially in the wake of Kant, is woefully inadequate to the demands of human knowing.⁸⁰ In operating within such a *dyadic* frame, no matter how adeptly one navigates it to avoid reductionism, there will almost inevitably be an inclination either toward the solipsistic conclusion that everything one knows is the product of one's own mind or the naïve realist assumption that reality is out there for

⁷⁶ Charles S. Peirce, "Trichotomic," in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian J. W. Kloesel, vol. 1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 281.

⁷⁷ On Peirce's relation to Scholastic thought, and Scotus's in particular, see John Boler, "Peirce and Medieval Thought," in Misak, *Cambridge Companion to Peirce*, 58–86; John Boler, "Peirce, Ockham and Scholastic Realism," *Monist* 63, no. 3 (1980): 290–303; Boler, *Charles Peirce and Scholastic Realism: A Study of Peirce's Relation to John Duns Scotus* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963).

⁷⁸ Poinset, *Tractatus de signis*, 202.

⁷⁹ I am careful throughout to employ "object" and "thing" in distinct technical senses. An "object" is a focal point of a power, whether also a thing with real being or not, and a "thing" designates a real existent insofar as it is a real existent and not insofar as it might also be an object of cognition. See Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan, 2nd ed., The Collected Works of Jacques Maritain 7 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 96–107; Deely, *Semiotic Animal*, 120–23; John Deely, *The Human Use of Signs, or, Elements of Anthroposemiosis* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 14, 41–42.

⁸⁰ On the development of the subjective-objective dichotomy according to current dominant usage, see Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone, 2007); Daston, "Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective," *Social Studies of Science* 22, no. 4 (1992): 597–618. On the inadequacy of the subjective-objective dichotomy for framing human knowing, given that cognition occurs through semiosis, see Deely, *Purely Objective Reality*, 14–16; Deely, *Human Use of Signs*, 41–42.

anyone who takes a good look to understand.⁸¹ Both perspectives conceive of knowing as occurring through forms of secondness.

Corporeal sensation occurs through the direct causal action of an object on a subject, that is, through secondness.⁸² The senses filter in certain respects but do not interpret—this was a key component to the grounds for Scholastic realism, a component that is dismissed in modernity, even among empiricists.⁸³ Object and subject are in direct contact in sensation, which is why sensation occurs through intuition rather than abstraction.⁸⁴ Every higher operation of the knowing subject occurs through mediation

⁸¹ This is, of course, a claim that has quite broad implications, but it is one that has been especially well established by Deely and Bernard Lonergan (see below in this note) and also partially recognized more broadly. Balthasar, for example, intends his appropriation of the transcendental of Beauty to transcend the dualism of neo-Scholastic objectivism and modernist subjectivism (*Glory of the Lord I*, 143–50). Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx, in different ways, were wrestling with the same issue. What Deely does by drawing on John of St. Thomas's and Peirce's semiotics that none of the other figures does is root out the dichotomy altogether as an epistemological framework and ground cognitional processes on the thirdness of semiosis. For a discussion of modern tendencies toward idealism and naïve realism, see John Deely, *The Impact on Philosophy of Semiotics: The Quasi-Error of the External World with a Dialogue between a "Semiotist" and a "Realist"* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2003), 3–89. I allude here to Lonergan's critique of naïve realism as conceiving of knowing as "taking a good look" (*Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Robert M. Doran and Frederick E. Crowe, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 3 [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992], 657–59). Lonergan gets as far as one can within the subjective-objective frame without falling into one tendency or the other, and he does this in part by recognizing that "genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity," which equivalence itself functions as a kind of third, or mediating factor, between subject and object (*Method in Theology*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 14 [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988], 273). But I hold that Lonergan would have benefited from more robust semiotic resources as well.

⁸² Deely, *Purely Objective Reality*, 69–73.

⁸³ Deely has shown how the modern philosophical tendency toward solipsism is partially rooted in the near ubiquitous construal of secondary qualities (color, odor, taste, sound, warmth, etc.) as constructed by the mind. John Locke understood primary qualities (shape, size, solidity, number, etc.) to belong mind-independently to things, but if the secondary qualities through which one senses primary qualities are constructed, then the senses' access to primary qualities seems to lose hold as well. Hence the short step from Locke's empiricism to George Berkeley's idealism and David Hume's skepticism. See Deely, *Four Ages*, 522–35.

⁸⁴ Poinot, *Tractatus de signis*, 302. For an account of John of St. Thomas's and Peirce's agreement on intuitive and abstractive awareness, see Michael L. Raposa, "Poinot on the Semiotics of Awareness," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (1994): 395–408.

of thirdness. Thus, perception, what the Scholastics called *phantasiari*, is distinguished from sensation by the fact that the former occurs through triadic mediation rather than brute causality.⁸⁵ When the senses are stimulated by the causal action of a material thing, a phantasm is formed (a sign-vehicle) to stand for the thing (an object), and the estimative power determines whether that object is attractive, repulsive, or neutral (an interpretant).⁸⁶ *Phantasiari*, in rational and non-rational animals alike, does not attain to the natures of things, but only to objects insofar as they pertain to the animal's interests. The presence of the intellect in human animals elevates the cogitative faculty so that further relations of reason beyond those regarding the object as attractive, repulsive, or neutral can be introduced into the interpretation of the object.⁸⁷ In *intellectus*, which can and does attain to the natures of material things, the intellect generates concepts, which function both as interpretants of the phantasm and as sign-vehicles standing for the things in their quiddities.⁸⁸ The concept

⁸⁵ See Poinso, *Tractatus de signis*, 240–41.

⁸⁶ Deely, *Intentionality and Semiotics*, 155–58; Thomas A. Sebeok, *I Think I Am a Verb: More Contributions to the Doctrine of Signs*, Topics in Contemporary Semiotics (New York: Plenum, 1986), 12–14.

⁸⁷ Non-human animals use signs, including conventional signs (Poinso, *Tractatus de signis*, 204). The difference is that humans are aware of their sign usage, which then introduces further creative possibility in the creation and manipulation of signs (212; see also Jacques Maritain, "Language and the Theory of Signs," in *Frontiers in Semiotics*, ed. John Deely, Brooke Williams, and Felicia E. Kruse, Advances in Semiotics [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986], 54).

⁸⁸ John of St. Thomas employs the distinction between formal and instrumental signs in order to distinguish between the signification of concepts as sign-vehicles and that of others. Instrumental signs stand for objects by first being the object of some cognitive power and only thereafter signifying another object. Thus, a stop sign has to represent itself to my senses prior to signifying that I should stop. Formal signs stand for objects not by first representing themselves, but by bringing the cognitive power directly to the object through its information of the power. Concepts can become objects and therefore function as instrumental signs but, when functioning formally in cognition, they bring the cognitive power directly to objects by informing the power without making the power stop at the concept (Poinso, *Tractatus de signis*, 229). Even though he cites John of St. Thomas in support, Olivier-Thomas Venard employs the distinction between formal and instrumental signs in a manner quite opposed to John's understanding, even equating the distinction to that between natural and conventional signs. Venard claims that a portrait is a formal sign because the object is attained in the image (*La langue de l'ineffable: essai sur le fondement théologique de la métaphysique*, vol. 2, Thomas d'Aquin Poète Théologien [Geneva: Ad Solem, 2004], 291–96; see also Venard, *Pagina sacra: le passage de l'Écriture sainte à l'écriture théologique*, vol. 3, Thomas d'Aquin poète théologien [Paris: Cerf, 2009], 570–71). For John of St. Thomas, although the object is

is the form of the thing but also stands for the thing in its real existence, in its *esse reale*, and it does so through various interpretants: the object is conceived, first of all, under the aspect of being, various predications of the object are affirmed and denied in the operation of judgment, and the understanding remains ever bound to the phantasm, to which the intellect must perpetually turn in understanding it.⁸⁹ At every level of operation of the knowing subject above sensation, cognition occurs through triadic relations. This should not be surprising. Knowing is not a matter of objects hitting subjects in brute secondness, but of cognitive powers becoming indirect termini in real relations and relations of reason.

So much for John of St. Thomas's more classical Thomist-Aristotelian approach to cognition, but the basic line of thought is present in Peirce's approach as well, in a simpler, less Scholastic form. In Peirce's philosophy of mind, every thought is an interpretant of some previous thought or set of thoughts (sign-vehicle/s).⁹⁰ Peirce conceives of thought broadly, in a manner that could include any product of a cognitive or cathectic operation.⁹¹ When the mind has a particular focal point (object), real or otherwise, its thoughts about that object form a sequence of signs and interpretants which lead the thinker into further understanding of the object. One of Peirce's key insights into the action of signs is that what is at one moment an object is in the next a sign-vehicle and then an interpretant, and so on in a virtually infinite chain of semiosis.⁹² Thus, while a stop sign, as sign-vehicle, signifies braking through one's understanding of the social imposition, an image of a stop sign might equally function as an interpretant when one's children are running around the house and one wants it

attained in its image, such images are decidedly categorized as instrumental signs, since a power has to apprehend the image as a prior ontological condition to the image's signification. Formal signs are images of a kind (*species*), but not in the same way, since *species* are apprehended as objects only secondarily in reflection, which is why Maritain claims that the category of formal sign applies *only* to concepts (*Degrees of Knowledge*, 127–28). Semiotically speaking, however, it is appropriate to extend the category of formal sign to emotions and dispositions, which likewise function as sign-vehicles that bring powers directly to objects without first being objects of a power (Deely, *Purely Objective Reality*, 78).

⁸⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I q. 84–85; John Poinsett, *Tractatus de signis*, 237–38; Deely, *Intentionality and Semiotics*, 51–56.

⁹⁰ Peirce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" (*CP*, 5.284).

⁹¹ Peirce, "Some Consequences" (*CP*, 5.288–89).

⁹² Peirce, "Some Consequences" (*CP*, 5.284). See also Deely, *Semiotic Animal*, 96–97.

to end. Human thought is constituted as a continuous sequence of signs providing the background to all inquiry and forming a person's identity.⁹³

If Peirce and John of St. Thomas are correct about cognition proceeding through semiosis, then this suggests an anthropological foundation for a claim that most of the Christian tradition has held: that God's revelation *has* to be given to humanity through signs.⁹⁴ The semiotic constitution of divine revelation is not, therefore, the product of God's inaccessibility to human persons, but rather the natural consequence of the constitution of the receiver of that revelation.

Balthasar's Theology of Revelation and Missing Thirdness

My claim is that Balthasar's theology of revelation and faith runs into the consistency issues enumerated at the beginning of this section because there are problematic semiotic assumptions governing his account. We are now in a position to make the core concern more explicit: the problem is that Balthasar conceives of revelation as occurring through secondness rather than thirdness. Such is why an analogy Balthasar proposes for his understanding of revelation is the sun dazzling the witness's eyes—the sun overwhelms the eyes by brute secondness, by a dyadic causal relation. Revelation, on the other hand, occurs through semiosis, through the action of signs, which is essentially triadic in character.

Recall that faith ends up being a nominal entity in Balthasar's theology. The reason for this is because Balthasar conceives of revelation as dyadic rather than triadic. Most of the Christian tradition has held to the idea that faith is a prerequisite for understanding revelation because, semiotically speaking, it was recognized, in not so many words, that human persons do not have the immanent interpretants for God personally to become an

⁹³ Peirce, "Some Consequences" (*CP*, 5.310–17). On the semiotic constitution of the mind in Peirce, see Peter Skagestad, "Peirce's Semeiotic Model of the Mind," in Misak, *Cambridge Companion to Peirce*, 247–53.

⁹⁴ I should note that a semiotic account of divine revelation is not an extension of Peirce's thought that he had in view. Peirce did think the play of signs within the world and one's understanding leads to belief in and commitment to God, but he did not develop an account of revelation; see Peirce, "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God" in *CP*, 6.452–93. For discussions of Peirce's philosophy of religion, see Michael L. Raposa, *Theosemiotic: Religion, Reading, and the Gift of Meaning* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020); Raposa, *Peirce's Philosophy of Religion*, *Peirce Studies* 5 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). Walker Percy, however, did seem to think Peirce's thought would serve an understanding of divine revelation; see *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York: Picador, 2000).

object of human knowledge and love. Faith, hope, and love are just such interpretants, divinely given, which capacitate the human person to know and love God through God's revelatory words and deeds.⁹⁵ In Balthasar's theology of revelation, it must be the case either that human beings naturally possess the interpretants for understanding the sign-vehicles of revelation as standing for God and are therefore naturally capable of seeing the Christ form, or that interpretants, as the thirds of sign-triads, have been left out of the picture because he construes revelation as dyadic. Balthasar flatly rejects the former option, and he makes claims suggesting the accuracy of the latter. One might attempt to defend Balthasar by saying that the radiance by which the Christ form is seen involves a kind of thirdness—the light radiating from the Christ form is itself the interpretant through which the revelation of the Christ form is grasped. But the interpretant, as an indirect terminus *within* the cognitive power, cannot be outside the power, which is why, even though there is sensible light functioning as the formal object of corporeal sight, seeing occurs through secondness and not thirdness.

⁹⁵ Pierre Rousselot conceives of the necessity of the light of faith for understanding the signs of revelation in something like this manner; see "The Eyes of Faith," in *The Eyes of Faith*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), 25–36. The problem, however, is that Rousselot lacks a sufficient semiotic framework for unfolding his insight, which is why Balthasar accuses him of remaining too close to Kantianism in the end (*Glory of the Lord I*, 171). As Matthew Levering notes, Balthasar drew on Rousselot's exposition of "the eyes of faith" in his own understanding of seeing the form (*The Achievement of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Introduction to His Trilogy* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019], 17, 59–60). But where Rousselot arguably retains traces of thirdness in his understanding of the need for human persons to be made "sympathetic" to God as the object of knowledge by the light of faith and by love in order to make sense of the signs of revelation, Balthasar construes this light *not* as *within* a person's faculties, but as flowing from the form itself. Balthasar's aesthetic attempt to overcome Rousselot's proximity to Kantianism by loading the light into the form results in his conceiving of revelation as occurring through secondness rather than thirdness. Rousselot, on the other hand, does seem at times, as Balthasar suggests, to place the emphasis on the interpreter of the signs of revelation in such a way that leaves one wondering how projectionism is to be avoided. Rigorously conceiving of the sign as a triadic relation, which Rousselot does not do, is essential here because it permits one to differentiate between a sign fundamentally (a sign is a sign in virtue of the founding of the relation regardless of whether there is an interpreter to understand the sign-vehicle) and a sign in act (a sign is in act when there is an interpreter who can enter into the relation according to its founding). This distinction depends on the triadic character of the sign and avoids both subjectivist projection and naïve objectivism. Rousselot's discussion of faith and reason would also have benefited from distinctions in types of signs, but further explication of these suggestions is outside the scope of this article.

Furthermore, Balthasar makes no distinction between sensation and perception. Recall that both intellection and perception are distinguished formally from sensation by the fact that cognition occurs through thirdness while sensation proceeds via secondness. This explains why freedom respecting faith in and rejection of Christ becomes questionable in Balthasar's account. A billiard ball does not choose which direction it goes after being hit by another. There is no freedom in secondness. The senses sense according to their natures whether people want them to or not, but how objects are perceived and understood by human persons incorporates their freedom because of the interpretation that thirdness involves.⁹⁶

A further observation regarding the *analogia entis* is called for. The interpretation of the *analogia entis* that Balthasar thinks undermines revelation in Christ is one associated with the *triplex via*. Balthasar's concern is that such an interpretation distances God from God's revelation, or hides God "behind" it, rather than understanding God's self as fully manifest within God's self-communication. While each of the ways of the *triplex via* involves its own full semiotic action, there is nevertheless a correlation that can be drawn between the elements of the sign-triad and the those of the *triplex via*: (1) the *via causalitatis* correlates to the effects of God's action which operate as sign-vehicles standing for God; (2) the *via remotionis* correlates to conceptual interpretants leading the knower from the sign-vehicles to God because such mediating concepts need to be partially denied in their application to God; (3) and the *via eminentiae* correlates to God as object because through it perfections are recognized as belonging to God preeminently.⁹⁷ In other words, the line of interpretation of the

⁹⁶ Hence, Nichols claims: "Here [in Balthasar's account of the 'objective evidence' of the Christ form] hermeneutics, whether cultural or philosophical, are sent packing, on the grounds that One who is both God and man cannot but draw what is universally valid in human life and thought to himself" (*The Word Has Been Abroad*, 43). It should be noted that the thirdness constitutive of animal sense cognition does not entail the freedom of non-human animals. The human person's rationality renders even her perception relatively free, though it cannot be divorced from the biological determinations undergirding it. Thirdness is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the freedom of cognition and action.

⁹⁷ This line of interpretation of the *analogia entis* specifically concerns *conceptual* interpretants of God, the limitations of which need to be recognized, since they are associated in their mode of signifying with human experience and knowledge of creatures. That is, it is not the theological virtues as interpretants that need to be negated in the *via remotionis*, though, as created habits, they need to be recognized as limited participations in God's operations.

analogia entis associated with the *triplex via* is triadic in character precisely because the sign is triadic in its nature.

When Balthasar enfolds the *analogia entis* into the positive revelation of the Christ form, he reduces the *analogia entis* from thirdness to secondness—to the dyadic relation between the Christ form and the one seeing the form. The classical formulation of the *analogia entis* was not meant to distance God from God's revelation, but only to bring to consciousness the limitations of human understanding of that revelation, which is why the *via remotionis* correlates to the interpretant, to the indirect terminus within the human cognitive power of God's revelatory activity. As we have seen, the difference between secondness and thirdness is this—that the latter integrates a terminus in a cognitive power into some relation between sign-vehicle and object, while the former is constituted only by a dyadic relation. Thus, when Balthasar transposes the *analogia entis* to the Christ form, he thereby transposes the negation that was classically applied to the understanding in the cognitive power to the negativity of the infinitude that is itself manifest within the Christ form. The negation of the interpretant in the semiosis of revelation is migrated into the visible form of the radiant Christ so that the *via remotionis* obtains in the seeing of the form itself. In other words, Balthasar's dyadic form of the *analogia entis* falls in line with the rest of his theology of revelation—here too the interpretant disappears.⁹⁸

Balthasar intends for his appropriation of the transcendental of Beauty to overcome what he considers to be the neo-Scholastic tendency toward objectivism and the modernist tendency, implicit already (in Balthasar's view) in Augustine's and Aquinas's illuminationism but brought to its extreme in modernism, toward subjectivism with respect to the reception of revelation.⁹⁹ Balthasar claims: "This dualism can be abolished only by introducing as well the thought-forms and categories of the beautiful. The beautiful is above all a *form*, and the light does not fall on this form from above and from outside, rather it breaks forth from the form's interior."¹⁰⁰ I do not think Balthasar's theology achieves this "abolition" because he continues to structure the whole of his theology of revelation (and cognitional theory) through the secondness proper to the relation between a subject and an

⁹⁸ Here, the interpretants that disappear are not the theological virtues, but the concepts that mediate between human experience and God. But the root of the disappearance of the interpretant throughout is the same—the construal of revelation as occurring through dyadic causality rather than triadic semiosis.

⁹⁹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 143–50.

¹⁰⁰ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 146.

object. The thirdness of semiosis accounts for how persons existing within a world constituted by relations, both real and of reason, can enter into those relations to understand it and creatively contribute to it. The main object here, however, is not to discuss how semiotics can account for both realism and social construction. I am concerned primarily with demonstrating that what I consider to be Balthasar's primary contribution—showing that the Christ form is not to be transcended but is rather the fullness of revelation because of its radiance and capaciousness—can be preserved from a semiotic view, and indeed given a more robust foundation that overcomes the consistency issues in Balthasar's own theology of revelation.

A Semiotic Appropriation of Balthasar's Account of Revelation in Christ

Balthasar is antagonistic to attempts to conceive of Christ as a sign. So, it might seem from the outset like what I am attempting to do here can be only a betrayal of his project, but I do not think this supposition is well founded. Balthasar's criticisms of conceiving of Christ as a sign always proceed from Saussurean semiological presuppositions about the sign.¹⁰¹ Balthasar claims that Christ is not a sign behind which there is some alternate signified, but is rather both simultaneously in the one Christ form.¹⁰² I contend that, with a more robust semiotic framework, Balthasar's semiotic concerns can be satisfied, that the consistency issues in Balthasar's theology of revelation can be rectified, and that fundamental Balthasarian insights concerning the radiance of the Christ form can be appropriated. Due to space limitations, I can offer only an outline of that appropriation here.

The Radiance of Christ, Semiotically Conceived

John of St. Thomas inquires what kind of sign a sign arising from custom is, and he distinguishes two aspects under which such a sign can be conceived.

¹⁰¹ Balthasar's semiotic criticisms are consistently framed in terms of the sign–signified dyad. One of the major weaknesses of the Saussurean tradition in comparison to the Peircean (and Poinsonian, we might add) is that the former conceives of the sign in dyadic rather than triadic terms (see Deely, *Four Ages*, 681–83). Venard attempts to restore the Aristotelian semantic triangle (which is one iteration of the sign-triad) over the Saussurean semantic dyad (*La langue de l'ineffable*, 2:252–61). But he often still employs a Saussurean semiological framework, which leads him to misinterpret John of St. Thomas as operating with an understanding of the sign as dyadic rather than triadic (2:291–96).

¹⁰² Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 146–49. See also Riches, "Balthasar and the Analysis of Faith," 54–55.

Considered as to its cause, the customary sign is stipulated, since it is founded through imposition rather than through natural causality or resemblance. Considered as to its effect, the customary sign is natural, since custom functions as a second nature.¹⁰³ Such is why words, although stipulated signs, can become quasi-naturally bound to the concepts and things they signify. The key background to this claim is John's account of relations. Since all signs, natural or conventional, are relations, this permits the naturalization of conventional signs as well as the alternative stipulation of natural signs for conventional ends.

In *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine claims that the signs God employs in revelation are given signs (i.e., stipulated).¹⁰⁴ It is clear that the signs comprising the sources of revelation, such as the words of Scripture and the sensible materials of the sacraments, are conventional sign-vehicles, but Augustine, along with Aquinas and John of St. Thomas, also saw that God's use of various created things within God's historical revelation involved giving stipulated meaning to those created things, rather than a signification that was founded in their natural causal capacities or resemblances.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, if, as Balthasar claims, the "arbitrariness" of human language is a product of the human being's depth of interiority, which precipitates increased freedom of expression, then God's self-communication should involve the greatest freedom of stipulation.¹⁰⁶ Thus, the snake on the pole that, according to Num 21, Moses used to heal the Israelites from snake

¹⁰³ John of St. Thomas is here adding a third category to the classic distinction between natural and conventional signs (Poinso, *Tractatus de signis*, 269–77). Similarly, Peirce claims that, while a sign-vehicle is properly categorized as either index, icon, or symbol, sign-vehicles can take on aspects of the other two categories through associations; see "What Is a Sign?" in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian J. W. Kloesel, vol. 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 8–9, and "The Icon, Index, and Symbol" (*CP*, 2.293). Walker Percy draws the connection between Peirce and John of St. Thomas on this point in a letter to John Deely, for which see Deely's "Foreword to the Corrected Second Edition" in Poinso, *Tractatus de signis*, xxiii–xxiv.

¹⁰⁴ Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, 129–31.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 1, a. 10; Poinso, *Tractatus de signis*, 276–77.

¹⁰⁶ Balthasar, *Theo-Logic I*, 158–59. Though, I should add that stipulated signs are purely arbitrary only within a Sausurrean perspective; see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehay, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 67–70. The Peircean and Poinsonian approaches to the sign recognize that stipulations, although *relatively* arbitrary, always depend on an undercurrent of natural signification (see Deely, *Human Use of Signs*, 161, and *Purely Objective Reality*, 98–104; Thomas A. Sebeok and Marcel Danesi, *The Forms of Meaning: Modeling Systems Theory and Semiotic Analysis* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000], 48–50).

bites would not have signified healing by virtue of its natural causality, but through God's imposition of a meaning onto the sign-vehicle.¹⁰⁷

A human person naturally signifies the divine nature through the human person's participated likeness to God's nature. The human person does not in and of itself signify an individual divine person, or God's inner mystery; this can be done only by stipulating that a human nature have this meaning, which, in the case of Christ, is founded on God's assumption of that nature to the person of the Son.¹⁰⁸ Although Christ's humanity is a stipulated sign-vehicle of God's inner mystery, this does not make the sign purely arbitrary.¹⁰⁹ The undercurrent of natural signification proper to creation and the human person's place within it renders Christ's human nature an eminently fitting sign-vehicle for God to employ in the completion of revelation and the recapitulation of creation and history. Nonetheless, the meaning God imposes on Christ's humanity in the hypostatic union is not natural to that human nature; it is therefore stipulated. Christ's human nature is a sign-vehicle for God whether recognized as such by particular persons or not because, in the hypostatic union, God effects the imposition of Christ's human nature as a sign-vehicle bearing an *esse ad*, an ordering toward, God *personally*.¹¹⁰ Christ's human nature is a sign-vehicle *in act* when a witness of Christ in his humanity possesses faith (along

¹⁰⁷ More precisely, God's use of the snake-pole artifact as an instrumental efficient cause of the healing involved imposing a new meaning on the artifact because the causal capacity did not belong to the artifact *in se*.

¹⁰⁸ I am avoiding the question of how one should categorize Christ according to Peirce's typology of signs. To say that God works through stipulation in divine revelation does have certain implications with respect to Peirce's typology, but God's stipulations transcend creaturely stipulations, which means divine revelation may stretch and transfigure Peirce's types. My employment of John of St. Thomas's notion of stipulation or imposition already involves a kind of transfiguration of the natural–stipulated division on the creaturely level, inasmuch as giving a stipulated meaning to a human nature via personal union transcends any creaturely possibility of stipulation. For Peirce's ten classes of signs, see "Division of Signs" (*CP*, 2.227–72). Andrew Robinson and Christopher Southgate argue that Christ should be categorized as an iconic qualisign according to Peirce's typology ("Incarnation and Semiotics: A Theological and Anthropological Hypothesis Part 1: Incarnation and Peirce's Taxonomy of Signs," *Theology and Science* 8, no. 3 [2010]: 265–82). I would contest the assumptions about the ontology of Christ and the *analogia entis* that led them to this conclusion. Cyril Orji follows them on this (*A Semiotic Christology* [Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021], 163–65).

¹⁰⁹ See note 106 above.

¹¹⁰ If, as John of St. Thomas (and arguably Balthasar) thinks, the appearances of a material thing are sign-vehicles signifying the essence of a thing even though the thing in essence and appearance is substantially *one*, then there is no obstacle to considering Christ's humanity to be a sign-vehicle for the Word in spite of the hypostatic union.

with love and hope and the gifts of the Spirit), which is a participation in the very divine understanding that founds the signs of revelation, as the necessary interpretant.¹¹¹

Since, however, as John of St. Thomas points out, stipulated signs can become naturalized through custom, it is possible to conceive of Christ's human nature becoming a quasi-natural (not as opposed to supernatural but as opposed to stipulated) sign-vehicle of God's glory for the believer.¹¹² Christ's human nature is a sign-vehicle for the glory of the Lord by God's stipulation. But, for those who enter into that semiosis through faith (and the more deeply the better), God's glory radiates from Christ's visible form via a kind of infused rather than acquired custom.¹¹³ The Cross, which in and of itself does not signify glory, comes through God's imposition and the participation of the faithful to radiate the divine glory.¹¹⁴ It is this development of perception of the divine mystery in the visibility of revelation that constitutes the spiritual senses, but they are given not through the

¹¹¹ John of St. Thomas and Peirce both insist that sign-vehicles are not such merely for those who grasp them, but by virtue of the founding of their *esse ad*, either through imposition or in real characteristics of things. Thus, a closed book is still a sign-vehicle, a virtual sign-vehicle. However, it is a sign-vehicle *in act* only when it is being read. This distinction between virtual and actual signs does not result in everything being a sign for everything else, though this is possible in principle. Anything *can* function as a sign-vehicle for anything else, but something is *in fact* a sign-vehicle only by virtue of a real or imposed fundament of the sign-relation (see Poinset, *Tractatus de signis*, 275; Peirce, "Icon, Index, and Symbol" [CP, 2.275]). This provides a semiotic basis for Balthasar's claim that Christ "in and of himself, says everything to everyone" (*Glory of the Lord I*, 452).

¹¹² The parenthetical qualification of this sentence is essential. I am using "naturalized" and "quasi-natural" in describing the assimilation of stipulated signs through faith *not* in the sense that the natural is opposed to the supernatural, but in the sense that the natural sign is opposed to the imposed or stipulated.

¹¹³ My point is akin to Venard's intention in his claim that "the instrumental signification (given by God) transfigures the formal signification (a tortured man)" (*Pagina sacra*, 3:574). However, it remains problematic for Venard's articulation of why this is the case that he misemploys the formal-instrumental distinction and operates within a Saussurean dyadic semiological framework. Instead of conceiving of the sign-vehicle as becoming quasi-naturalized through the integration of various relations as interpretants into the believer's perception, Venard seems at times to follow Balthasar in reducing the semiosis of revelation to the secondness of sensation (3:575–88).

¹¹⁴ This is not to say that there is no analogy of beauty, just that natural beauty is transfigured in God's impositions. See Stephen Fields, "The Beauty of the Ugly: Balthasar, the Crucifixion, Analogy and God," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 2 (2007): 172–83.

seeing of the form, but rather in becoming accustomed through faith to the relation between God's self and God's stipulations in revelation.

While it is necessary, semiotically speaking, to distinguish among the sign-vehicle, interpretant, and object, recall that it is not the case that things remain statically within those roles. This means that, while faith, hope, and love are first of all the interpretants that enable the human person to receive God's revelation in Christ, Christ's humanity is also a sign-vehicle for the theological virtues (e.g., Christ signifying faith through his obedience). Whether or not one wants to hold with Balthasar that Christ possesses faith, Christ is certainly the exemplar of the Christian life lived through the habits of faith, hope, and love. Christ is also the source of all grace and of the theological virtues generated by grace. This interchange of the semiotic roles played by the theological virtues and Christ provides the basis for upholding something like Balthasar's claim that faith radiates from the Christ form. Christ becomes a naturalized sign-vehicle of faith for the one who possesses faith, even if this does not imply that seeing the Christ form is itself its origin. Christ being the source of all grace also means that Christ can become, for the one accustomed to God's meaning by the theological virtues, a naturalized sign-vehicle of the grace received from him, even if it is not, ontologically speaking, originally received through seeing. Christ's sensible form *is* a sign-vehicle for grace and faith by God's imposition, but the theological virtues make the believer accustomed to God's imposition so that grace and faith become *perceptible* in the Christ form as well.

Regarding the issue of grace and freedom, Balthasar attempts to circumvent the classical debates, but my claim is that his proposal runs into an even more profound threat to freedom derived from the fact that he construes revelation in the mode of secondness. While there are certainly concerns regarding grace and freedom that stem from holding to a classical account of grace, one advantage is that secondness is not the appropriate category for thinking through the relation between primary and secondary causality when they are conceived non-competitively. In Balthasar's account, grace moves the person undeniably through secondness, because its movement proceeds through sensation. On the other hand, because interpretants can involve the free participation of a person in the actuation of sign-vehicles as signs in act, conceiving of revelation as occurring through thirdness can reestablish the freedom of the personal response to Christ, even if, under the formality of efficient causality, which is distinct from the formality of semiosis, many questions still remain regarding the preservation of freedom in the gracious movement of a person to the act of faith.

Recall that the negation of conceptual interpretants of God's revelation is enfolded into the negativity of Christ's alienation on the Cross in Balthasar's account of the *analogia entis*. Even though preservation of the triadic structure of revelation demands retention of the *triplex via*, it is nevertheless the case, semiotically speaking, that Christ's death on the Cross is a sign-vehicle (as well as an interpretant, at a different moment) of the negations undertaken in the *via remotionis*. Balthasar is correct that it is in Christ's death on the Cross that the inadequacy of one's conceptual grasp of God becomes sharpest, which renders, by God's own stipulation, the crucified Christ a sign-vehicle for the negations of the *via remotionis*. The Christ form can indeed, through grace, become a quasi-natural sign-vehicle for the negative aspect of the *analogia entis* such that the remotion of God can become perceptible in Christ's death on the Cross.

A Response to Balthasarian Objections

Three important objections arise at this point, and answering them will enable us to unfold this semiotic take on the radiant Christ more fully. First, Balthasar's account of the Christ form is driven by the aim not to leave anything "behind" the Christ form. Do the distinctions between Christ's human nature as sign-vehicle, God as object, and faith, hope, and love as interpretants not effectively fracture the Christ form and place the God who is revealed behind God's self-expression in Christ? Second, the suggestion that Christ's human form radiates the divine glory for the faithful seems to depend on a kind of projection of the believer's perspective onto the Christ form. Does this not overly subjectivize the radiance of Christ? Third, a central premise of Balthasar's thought is that Christ is the fullness of God's revelation and that the veracity of the Christ form must therefore be intrinsically evident. How does distinguishing the generation of faith, hope, and love from seeing the Christ form not undermine the sufficiency and completeness of God's revelation in Christ?

Regarding the first, some further semiotic points should be mentioned. While a book is, on the one hand, filled with sign-vehicles, it is on the other also a sign-vehicle as a whole, or an interpretant as a whole, or an object as a whole. Even though it is essential to delineate Christ's human nature as sign-vehicle, God as object, and faith, hope, and love as interpretants in the *principal* structure of God's revelation in Christ, the flexibility of these semiotic roles actually offers a foundation for Balthasar's account of the Christ form. All of the elements Balthasar takes to be enfolded within the Christ form, including the recapitulation of creation and history, constitute one sign-vehicle (one *Gestalt*) that stands for God by

virtue of God's imposition, but can do so in a quasi-natural manner when interpreted through participation in the divine life.¹¹⁵ The distinctions between sign-vehicle, interpretant, and object therefore need not result in distancing God from the media of God's revelation, but can rather provide the very grounds for how the Christ form, in terms roughly consistent with Balthasar's account, coalesces for the believer in the first place.

To the second objection, it is true that only those with faith will perceive the radiance of the Christ form, but this does not imply that the form's radiance is merely perspectival, nor does it suggest that it is a product of Christians' projection. Christ's life, death, and resurrection are sign-vehicles for the glory of God not by human but by divine imposition, and the mode of that imposition (since God's impositions are not like human impositions) is the assumption of a human nature in the hypostatic union. The Christ form recapitulates all of God's communication by God's own stipulation. This *esse ad* is founded in Christ whether human persons recognize it or not, though grasping the Christ sign is not a matter of seeing what is "objectively" there, but rather of entering into the *esse ad* that God established in the hypostatic union. Humans have a connatural capacity to understand human impositions, but the human person must be given the capacity to understand divine impositions through a participation in the divine understanding itself, that is, through faith.¹¹⁶ The deeper one enters into this participation, the more "naturalized" the Christ form's signification of the divine glory becomes, and the more that glory will therefore radiate from the form. This is a higher rather than merely different way of perceiving Christ's humanity. This emphasis on the direct relation between depth of sight of Christ's radiance and degree of participation in Christ is actually consistent with Balthasar's own.¹¹⁷

To the third objection, the visible data of revelation are indeed revelation, since what constitutes them as sign-vehicles is God's imposition. But revelation in act occurs only when there is a receiver, possessing the adequate interpretants, to understand God's meaning in revealing. In one

¹¹⁵ For list of such elements, see Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 182–83.

¹¹⁶ See Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 149.

¹¹⁷ See the section entitled "Christian attunement" in Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I* (235–50). John Riches observes the increase in faith that comes through the contemplation of the form through faith, a circularity that is unproblematic once one has entered the circle: "The understanding of the subjective experiential aspects of faith illuminates and is in turn illuminated by its object which enlightens and opens the eyes of faith as it informs it with the self-disclosure of divine love" ("Balthasar and the Analysis of Faith," 55; see also Mongrain, *Systematic Thought*, 63–65).

sense, then, the meaning of revelation in its full actuality is the effective communication of God's self to a receiver, which implies that what it means for revelation to be intrinsically evident is just for it to be compelling in its reception by those who possess the interpretants to understand the sign-vehicles according to God's imposition.¹¹⁸ Since Christ is the principle of grace and the theological virtues, Christ is still the completion of revelation, not only in his visibility but also because it is he in his divinity who bestows the interpretative capacity to understand the sign-vehicles of revelation. However, since all of the elements of God's revelation can and do constitute one *Gestalt* (due to the capaciousness of God's imposition), it is nevertheless possible to uphold a form of Balthasar's idea that the Christ form itself contains in its visibility all that is necessary for conversion, even if this becomes perceptible only after one's conversion.

Conclusion

In his account of the radiant Christ, Balthasar advances claims of profound importance, theologically and semiotically speaking. Balthasar speaks truly about a Christian experience of God's glory becoming perceptible in the crucified Christ, but he does so without adequate semiotic resources to undergird that claim. He therefore, by bringing everything under the formality of seeing and sensation, construes the manner in which Christ's radiance is perceived in the Christ form dyadically. By construing reception of revelation dyadically, faith is left without sufficient definition, the freedom of the act of faith is undermined, and the *analogia entis*'s negation of human conceptualization of God is dissolved. I have argued that, with adequate recognition of the triadic, relational character of the sign, the proper role of termini in the cognitive power of the one receiving revelation can be restored, while essential elements of Balthasar's account of the radiance and capaciousness of the Christ form can be retained.

One might reasonably surmise that the radiance of the Christ form guided Balthasar's theology of revelation because it took priority within his own life of faith, through his being accustomed to it. Such prioritization is theologically essential because it rightly acknowledges that God's revelation in Christ is indispensable and unsurpassable, and it should not be lost as a result of consistency issues internal to Balthasar's theology of revelation. The problem, however, is that Balthasar's theology does not

¹¹⁸ Balthasar's account of the "objective evidence" of the Christ form is problematically formulated within the subjective-objective dichotomy.

employ adequate resources to account for how such perception of the Christ form develops. I have tried to offer an initial formulation, one that no doubt requires further explication, of how a more robust semiotic theory can provide just such resources.