

## ANGELS AS MIRRORS OF THE HUMAN: THE ANTHROPOLOGIES OF RILKE AND BONAVENTURE THROUGH THE LENSES OF HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

YVES DE MAESENEER

---

### ABSTRACT

In this article we present a theological-anthropological exploration, interpreting the figure of the angel as a mirror of our human condition. The point of departure is an analysis of Hans Urs von Balthasar's approach to two major sources of our imagination of the angel: Bonaventure (1221–1274) and Maria Rainer Rilke (1875–1926). A comparison of his accounts of the Franciscan theologian and the Modern poet, respectively, reveals remarkable parallels in discourse, clustered around the tensions between vulnerability and openness, immanence and transcendence, and love and loss. Both Rilke and Bonaventure reject the classical angel figure as a human ideal, as it cannot integrate the paradoxes of human existence. Their alternative visions of what it means to be human, have many terms in common: heart, vulnerability, mortality, openness, abyss, suspension, transparency, receptivity, descent (kenosis), humility, poverty, etc. However, their meaning is different because Rilke does not recognize an absolute transcendence as the source of love and the vis-à-vis of the human. This immanentism leaves him no other option than the vain attempt to exorcize the angel figure altogether, while Bonaventure's vision preserves the angel as an anthropological mirror, albeit an angel radically transfigured by God's wounded love.

### Key words

Theological anthropology; angels; Hans Urs von Balthasar; Bonaventure; Rainer Maria Rilke

DOI: 10.14712/23363398.2016.6

What are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
or mortals, that you care for them?  
You have made them for a little while lower than the angels;  
you have crowned them with glory and honor ...  
(Heb 2:6–7 – NRSV; cf. Psalm 8:5–6)

In line with Giorgio Agamben's intuition that the figure of the angel plays a paradigmatic role in (theological) anthropology,<sup>1</sup> we undertook an analysis of the angel motif in two theological essays, guided by the question of what it means to be human.<sup>2</sup> This resulted in the reconstruction of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological anthropology through his interpretation of two key authors who explicitly use the angel figure. In von Balthasar's *Glory of the Lord*, Bonaventure is presented as the apotheosis of premodern theology; Rilke appears as the culmination of Modern literature in von Balthasar's doctoral dissertation. In this article, we will present our thematic analysis of the angel figure by clustering our interpretation of von Balthasar's two essays around fundamental anthropological tensions, indicated in the subtitles. This will allow us to compare both perspectives, pointing at parallels at the level of discourse (terms and paradoxes) and critical differences.

## 1. Rilke and the Impasse of Modern Anthropology

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies?  
and even if one of them pressed me suddenly against his heart:  
I would be consumed in that overwhelming existence.  
For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we are still just  
able to endure, and we are so awed because it serenely disdains to  
annihilate us.  
Every angel is terrifying. (*First Elegy*)<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Giorgio Agamben. *The Kingdom and the Glory. For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2011, pp. 144–166.

<sup>2</sup> This article can be read as a diptych with Yves De Maeseneer – Julia Meszaros. *Mirrors of the Human: Angels*. *Literature and Theology* 29, 4 (2015), pp. 450–464.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rainer Maria Rilke. *Duineser Elegien. Die Sonnette an Orpheus*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel 1974. For the English translation: Stephen Mitchell. *Duino Elegies*. Boston: Shambhala Publications 1992.

### 1.1 *Being in the World (In der Welt sein)*<sup>4</sup>:

#### *Immanence and Openness*

Von Balthasar presents Rilke's anthropology parallel to Martin Heidegger's view of the human being as 'being-in-the-world'.<sup>5</sup> The human being is not considered as a soul or subject positioned outside or above the world, but as part of the world. Belonging to the world implies that the human being shares in the world's finitude. The human being is radically finite, fragile and mortal. Rilke characterizes our existence as *Brechung* – breaking and broken. Paradoxically, Rilke affirms this negativity as a positive feature, i.e., as our specific form of openness to the world. Rilke sees in our inability to escape our containment in the world – our radical immanence – our very capacity for transcendence. Human transcendence is not directed beyond the world, but is to be realized in time.

As such, Rilke contrasts our human existence with the ideal of the angel. Angels belong to another world, completely separate from ours. Von Balthasar states that for Rilke the angel is a platonic figure, the 'representative of an idea: the idea of a knowledge without receptivity, without time, a *pure* reflection: "Mirrors, which draw their own Beauty that has streamed out from themselves, back into their own countenance" [*Second Elegy*];<sup>6</sup> Rilke imagines angels as narcissistic mirrors that reflect in their unearthly purity nothing else but themselves. In their infinite and unchanging universe these 'early successes, Creation's pampered favorites',<sup>7</sup> lack the humility to receive things. Angels would only absorb things, consume them, annihilate them. Human creatures, on the contrary, those beings in time, can be open

<sup>4</sup> The German in our subtitles is borrowed from von Balthasar's own titles in his chapter on Rilke.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar. *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele. Studien zu einer Lehre von letzten Haltungen III. Vergöttlichung des Todes*. Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag 1998<sup>2</sup>, pp. 193–315 (orig. 1939). [From now on: AddS III. All translations into English are mine.] The only available study that treats von Balthasar's reading of Rilke, yet which does not focus on angels, is: Anne M. Carpenter. *Theo-Poetics: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Risk of Art and Being*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Balthasar. AddS III, p. 226: 'Stellvertreter einer Idee: der Idee einer Erkenntnis ohne Rezeptivität, ohne Zeit, einer *reinen* Reflexion: „Spiegel, die die entströmte eigene Schönheit wiederschöpfen zurück in das eigene Antlitz“ [*Zweite Elegie*]. See also the brief recapitulation of von Balthasar's Rilke study in his *Herrlichkeit* III, 1. *Im Raum der Metaphysik. Teil 2: Neuzeit*. Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag 1965, pp. 760–761.

<sup>7</sup> Balthasar. AddS III, p. 227: 'Frühe Gegluckte, ihr Verwöhnten der Schöpfung' (*Zweite Elegie*).

and become receptive, transparent to let things be as they are: finite, fleeting, unique – unique because transient.

### ***1.2 Inauthenticity and Death (Verfallen und Tod): Fragility and Transcendence***

That the human being is ‘nothingness in time’ is confirmed in our death. However, we tend to flee from this truth into inauthenticity. In his *Tenth elegy* Rilke uses the fair as a metaphor of the contemporary world, which is lost in oblivion and entertainment. Rilke mentions posters advertising a beer, named *Todlos*, “Deathless”, that bitter beer that tastes sweet to its drinkers, as long as they chew fresh distractions along with it<sup>8</sup>. In this world, the poet wants to awaken us, human beings, to recognize our existential condition:

He must maintain, at one and the same time, radical mortality, finitude, brokenness [...], and transcendence, however, transcendence not alongside and against that which is finite and mortal, but transcendence of *this mortal itself* as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

Paradoxically, the human being has to affirm simultaneously life and death – at a deeper level there is no opposition between the two, but rather an ontological identity. Von Balthasar finds in Rilke a series of paradoxes: immanence is transcendence; breaking is ecstatic openness; suffering is happiness; emptiness is fullness; night is light; elegy is praise; etc. The mortal human being, most transient and vulnerable, is the one who is called to save that which is getting lost:

Precisely that which is more mortal is also that which is able to preserve more. [...] Thus the human heart, that most fragile vessel, is truly the center of the world, the refuge of all things [...] the place of transformation, which elevates everything to the eternal while it itself perishes.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> ‘Plakaten des „Todlos“, jenes bitteren Bieres, das den Trinkenden süß scheint’ (*Zehnte Elegie*).

<sup>9</sup> Balthasar. AddS III, p. 239: ‘Der müsste zugleich radikale Sterblichkeit, Endlichkeit, Gebrochenheit als Wesensgegebenheit [...], und Transzendenz festhalten, aber Transzendenz nicht neben und gegen das Endlich-Sterbliche, sondern *dieses Sterblichen selbst* als Ganzen.’

<sup>10</sup> Balthasar. AddS III, p. 255: ‘Gerade das Sterbliche ist auch das Erhaltendere. [...] So ist also das menschliche Herz, dieses zerbrechlichste Gefäß, wirklich Weltmitte,

### 1.3 Creation Out of Anxiety (*Die Schöpfung aus Angst*):

#### *Love and Kenosis*

How can the human being live up to this vocation? In particular, Rilke is facing the question how the human poet, this being of nothingness, can create out of this nothing.<sup>11</sup> Rilke proposes a specific attitude to the world, which he calls ‘intransitive love’<sup>12</sup>. Love becomes an intransitive verb, a verb that does not take an object. This love makes things or persons no longer objects of our subjectivity; it is a love that becomes absolutely transparent. For Rilke, this notion of pure love borders on anxiety. Being in the world in an authentic way, comes down to an experience of being suspended over the abyss of nothingness. In this state of suspension in anxiety (*‘Schweben in Angst’*)<sup>13</sup>, human beings have to surrender, to drop their defense mechanisms which usually cut them off from the world. Made porous, the human being becomes an interior space that welcomes the perishable things to be transfigured.

Von Balthasar claims that this absolute love turns out to be an impossible project. The attempt at ‘intransitive love’, a love without reciprocity, in which the I sought to disappear, resulted in a love without a You. Rilke seems to confuse love with the virtuosity and intransitivity of art.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, Rilke, who desires to distance himself from the angels, ends up creating a ‘closed world – closed like the world of the angels’<sup>15</sup>. Von Balthasar quotes a letter in which Rilke describes the poetic process as follows:

[When I am taking in a Spanish landscape] a whole inner world is brought forth, as if an angel who envelops the space, was blind and looked into itself. Thus no longer viewing the world from a human point of view but in the angel, is perhaps my real task.<sup>16</sup>

---

Zuflucht der Dinge, [...] Verwandlungsort, der, selber untergehend, alles ins Ewige hebt? Cf. 2 Cor. 4:7.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Balthasar. AddS III, p. 274.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Balthasar. AddS III, pp. 303–305.

<sup>13</sup> Balthasar. AddS III, p. 275; cf. Ibid. pp. 220–221: ‘Alles will schweben’.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Balthasar. AddS III, p. 305.

<sup>15</sup> Balthasar. AddS III, p. 289: ‘geschlossen wie die Welt – des Engels’.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Eine ganze Innenwelt herausgestellt, als ob ein Engel, der den Raum umfasst, blind wäre und in sich schaute. Diese nicht mehr vom Menschen aus, sondern im Engel geschaute Welt ist vielleicht meine wirkliche Aufgabe’ (Rilke quoted in: Balthasar. AddS III, pp. 256–257).

This quotation illustrates in a striking way how Rilke's poetry, which attempts to create a pure space in order to save things by interiorizing them, does not finally escape the angel's narcissism. He remains caught within a tragic monologue.

However, von Balthasar admits that at certain points Rilke comes very near to the Christian vision. In his radical recognition of our mortality, Rilke may be even more Christian than many theologians with Platonist tendencies. Moreover, Rilke's poems include themes like the poor, the beggar, and the blind, which symbolize God's kenotic descent into our world and embrace of our humility. There are even moments in which a metanoia (*Umkehrung*) is announcing itself, the movement in which God is revealing Himself, coming across and taking over the initiative. Von Balthasar concludes his essay with the Rilkean theme of the night, in which the self ends the tragic wrestling of intransitive love and ultimately surrenders itself to the other, unknown in the dark:

Love is no longer the intransitive ray of the heart, whose appeal is full of reluctance and resistance. Rather, the space of love is only created from beyond:

'O you, face on my face,  
unfastened in the depth,  
you, greatest overweight  
of my astonished sight.'<sup>17</sup>

#### ***1.4 Von Balthasar's Theological Critique of Rilke's Immanentism***

This last quote evokes the space of encounter with a You who calls us and looks at us – in vain. Von Balthasar explains that the fundamental impasse in Rilke is that the poet has a flattened notion of transcendence that blocks the possibility of being approached by a genuine other. Rilke's resistance against the angels is hardened in a total

---

<sup>17</sup> Balthasar: AddS III, p. 315: 'Liebe ist nicht mehr der intransitive Herzstrahl, dessen Anruf voll Hinweg ist und voll Abwehr. Sondern von drüben her wird erst der Raum der Liebe geschaffen:  
„O du in Tiefe gelöstes  
Gesicht an meinem Gesicht,  
Du meines staunenden Anschauens grösstes  
Übergewicht.“'

rejection of any transcendent otherness.<sup>18</sup> His radical affirmation of immanence leads to an immanentism, which condemns him to a monologue. Locked in a closed immanence, he promotes an existentialist embrace of the earth – equivalent to a ‘burial of the soul’<sup>19</sup>. Burial of the soul is another paradox in which opposite terms coincide. Von Balthasar states that, at a purely immanent level, Rilke’s paradoxes are unbearable contradictions<sup>20</sup>. Without being nourished by a You, the soul who abandons itself gets lost. That is why Rilke’s ‘kiss of the earth’ (*Erden-kuss*)<sup>21</sup> remains melancholic.

When Rilke states that ‘weakness is strength’ or ‘death is life’<sup>22</sup>, he is close to the message of the Apostle Paul. At this point, von Balthasar introduces a critical distinction between Rilke’s Modern ‘divinization of death’ (*Vergöttlichung des Todes*) and the traditional concept of the ‘deification of the mortal’ (*theosis*)<sup>23</sup>. While Rilke tends to divinize death, that is, declare death absolute, the Christian notion of *theosis* proclaims that our mortal existence is illuminated by the light of redemptive grace. In Jesus Christ, the Son of God embraced our mortal condition, but his divinity was not confused with death. The resurrection of Christ reveals that death is not the last word on our existence.<sup>24</sup> Rilke’s intransitive love, in which death and divinity, immanence and transcendence, become blurred or even equivocal, has to be distinguished from Christian love, which ‘grows from the immanence of an absolute transcendence’<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Balthasar. AddS III, p. 229.

<sup>19</sup> Balthasar. AddS III, p. 6. 204: ‘Begräbnis der Seele’.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Balthasar. AddS III, p. 222. Cf. Carpenter. *Theo-Poetics*, p. 32. Carpenter explains Rilke’s paradoxical view of human existence by referring to his metaphor of music (‘Gesang ist Dasein’, Balthasar. AddS III, p. 197): music cannot exist but in dying each moment anew. The tones have to disappear into silence for the melody to develop.

<sup>21</sup> Balthasar. AddS III, p. 449.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Balthasar. AddS III, pp. 218, 298–299.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Balthasar. AddS III, pp. 434, 442.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Balthasar. AddS III, pp. 322–323.

<sup>25</sup> Carpenter. *Theo-poetics*, p. 39, quoting von Balthasar’s article: Rilke und die religiöse Dichtung. *Stimmen der Zeit* 63 (1932), pp. 183–192, p. 188.

## 2. The Crucified Seraph: The Theological Anthropology of Bonaventure

When by seraphic glow of longing he [Francis] had been uplifted toward God, and by his sweet compassion had been transformed into the likeness of Him Who of His exceeding love endured to be crucified, [...] while he was praying on the side of the mountain, he beheld a Seraph having six wings, flaming and resplendent, coming down from the heights of heaven. [...] there appeared betwixt the wings the Figure of a Man crucified, having his hands and feet stretched forth in the shape of a Cross, and fastened unto a Cross. [...] Beholding this, Francis was mightily astonished, and joy, mingled with sorrow, filled his heart. He rejoiced at the gracious aspect wherewith he saw Christ, under the guise of the Seraph, regard him, but His crucifixion pierced his soul with a sword of pitying grief. He marvelled exceedingly at the appearance of a vision so unfathomable, knowing that the infirmity of the Passion doth in no wise accord with the immortality of a Seraphic spirit. [...] Accordingly, as the vision disappeared, it left in his heart a wondrous glow, but on his flesh also it imprinted a no less wondrous likeness of its tokens.

Bonaventure, *Legenda maior*, XIII<sup>26</sup>

In his essay on Bonaventure, von Balthasar puts to the fore that the great Franciscan theologian presents this scene as the apotheosis of Francis' existence and as the paradigm for Christian life in general.<sup>27</sup> Particularly in his *Itinerary of the Soul to God* (1259), the *doctor seraphicus* represents the Christian life as the path of the six wings of the Seraph, a route that exists in six stages of increasing *illuminatio* and *suspensio*, oriented towards *excessus* (Bonaventure's term for ecstasy, union with God). In our analysis of this anthropology, the reader will notice significant parallels between the views of Rilke and Bonaventure: they share in common certain terms (heart, descent, humility,

---

<sup>26</sup> Online version of Bonaventure. *The Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*. (Translated by E. Gurney Salter. New York: E.P. Dutton 1904). <http://www.ecatholic2000.com/bonaventure/assisi/francis.shtml>.

<sup>27</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar. *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik. II, 1*. Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag 1962, pp. 265–361 (from now on: H II, 1). For all translations, we used Hans Urs von Balthasar. *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics. II. Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Style*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1984 [GL II].



transparency, receptivity, openness, abyss, suspension, etc.) as well as a series of paradoxes.<sup>28</sup>

### *2.1 Seraphication: Illumination and suspensio*

In the process of seraphication, i.e., becoming like a seraph, Francis paradigmatically realizes the human potential to become ‘the eye of the world open to God’<sup>29</sup>. The human being is the privileged point of contact between heaven and earth, because being corporeal we belong indeed to the world, but being simultaneously spirit, we are also capable of transcendence. This dual nature that incorporates at once the lower and the higher is one reason why it was more fitting that God chose the human form, and not that of the angel, in order to realize His plan of salvation.<sup>30</sup> In the human being the whole world is present in a concentrated form (as a kind of microcosm); at the same time, the human being exceeds the world and refers to the divine source.

This dynamic vision of the human being as the place of encounter between the outside and the inside, the sensible and the spiritual, can be illustrated by Bonaventure’s theology of the senses.<sup>31</sup> Francis is said to have developed a spiritual sensorium for God, a similar receptivity like the one that angels (e.g., the seraphs) have. This seraphication involves a gradual *illuminatio*. The human senses, which in their sinfulness were locked in on themselves, are opened by the light of faith. The world is becoming more and more transparent. It is seized in its love relationship with God. The human being receives the gift to read the book of creation as reference to and representation of the image of the Son. The human being is enabled to perceive himself and the creatures in their true proportion: everything is oriented and returned to the figure of Christ. The whole of creation is perceived as the expression of the absolute expression of the Son.

The seraphic life of Saint Francis, paradigmatic for all humankind, is characterized by a dynamics of *suspensio*. To be suspended in Christ implies a state of admiration for the divine superabundance which is expressed in all God’s creatures – Bonaventure uses the metaphors

<sup>28</sup> In AddS von Balthasar does not elaborate upon the figure of Saint Francis in Rilke’s poetry.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Balthasar. H II, 1, p. 319.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Balthasar. H II, 1, pp. 286–288, 320–328. Cf. Mark J. McInroy. *Balthasar on the ‘Spiritual Senses’. Perceiving Splendour*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014, pp. 56–83.

of ocean and river overflowing from the abyss of God to evoke an inexhaustible fullness.<sup>52</sup> This suspension leads to an ecstatic rapture (*excessus*). Von Balthasar emphasizes that this seraphication of the soul does not mean an escape from the world; on the contrary, it is a more intense experience of the world, ‘the opening of the world for God, or more precisely the revelation of the fact that the world has already been grasped by God’<sup>53</sup>.

## ***2.2 Stigmatisation: Spirituality as Kenotic Descent***

That seraphication is not a kind of flight from the earth is confirmed by the fact that precisely Francis’ ecstatic vision of the crucified Seraph is the moment where Bonaventure’s theological anthropology is bound to the body and the earth: ‘The *impressio* of the stigmata is God’s imprint on the material world’<sup>54</sup> The spiritual journey entails a transformation through the Cross. The dynamics of suspension, the elevation to God, correspond to the state of the Crucified, ‘suspended “between heaven and earth”’<sup>55</sup> on the Cross. Illumination by the Image of Christ implies that the Cross offers us the key to reading the world. At the cross opened the abyss of God who expresses his immense height in extreme humility. Here is another reason why it is fitting that God became human rather than angel: becoming human demands a more radical humility to bind oneself with this creature of clay, taken from the dust of the ground, than to stay within the celestial world of angels.<sup>56</sup> In the crucified Christ God reveals Himself as gifted with a heart – the heart that embodies simultaneously the capacity to love and the risk to be wounded.

Let us have a look again at the figure of the Crucified Seraph. Contrary to the later iconographical motif, which represents the scene of the stigmatization by means of a seraphic angel holding a crucifix, Bonaventure explicitly says that Francis’ vision concerned a ‘*seraph crucifixus*’<sup>57</sup>, a crucified seraph. In the quotation above, we see that Bonaventure emphasizes the absurdity of this figure: Francis was

---

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Balthasar. H II, 1, pp. 270–273.

<sup>53</sup> Balthasar. H II, 1, p. 279; Balthasar. GL II, p. 273.

<sup>54</sup> Balthasar. H II, 1, p. 317; Balthasar. GL II, p. 315; cf. Balthasar. H II, 1, pp. 270, 277–279, 281, 284–285, 287, 317, 323, 357.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Balthasar. H II, 1, p. 277: ‘ja die mystische suspensio antwortet gerade auf das Suspendiertsein des Gekreuzigten „zwischen Himmel und Erde“ (translation mine).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Balthasar. H II, 1, pp. 319, 361. See Heb. 2:9–10.

<sup>57</sup> Bonaventure. *Legenda Minor*. 6.1.

astonished as the infirmity of the Passion cannot be harmonized with the spiritual immortality of the seraph. One could interpret this image as the ultimate consequence of the Franciscan shift of the imagination with regard to angels, one which situated the angels not exclusively in heavenly purity but saw them more directly involved with the mud of the earth.<sup>58</sup> The figure of the crucified seraph reorients the model of Christian spirituality, which at the time was understood as a *vita angelica*. The minor friars, like all medieval religious orders, considered angels as an important model for their own life, but they left the heights of pure contemplation in order to be ‘married to Lady Poverty’. Von Balthasar highlights how stigmatization – Francis receiving the wounds of Christ – radically changes the process of seraphication. Saint Francis is represented as a seraphic man, but this angelic status does not lead away from earthly misery. It no longer represents the spiritual way as a merely upward movement (climbing the ladder to God), but reverses it in a kenotic descent, responding to the Cross, the expression of God’s descent.

### 3. Vulnerability, Transcendence and the Kiss of the Cross: A Comparative Synthesis

That the human being is a dual creature (spirit and body) involves a double capacity for openness: transcendence and vulnerability. The human being is both *capax Dei* (open to God) and *capax passionis* (open to suffering). Commenting on Bonaventure, von Balthasar points out that this paradox can only be properly understood in the figure of Christ crucified, in which transcendent power gives itself in weakness. In this divine love, descending into nothingness and death, our being finds its ultimate glory. Von Balthasar’s essay ends with an almost doloristic praise of the Cross as the ‘nuptial kiss’ of heaven and earth.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Bonaventure interprets the extended arms of the crucified as a gesture of embrace, and his wounded side as a bloody opening, inviting us to enter his heart. Only located within the Trinitarian love relationships, we can begin to understand Bonaventure’s view of the crucifixion as the marriage between God and humankind.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. David Keck. *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998, pp. 126–127.

<sup>59</sup> Balthasar. H II, 1, p. 358: ‘bräutlichen Kuss’.

Our comparison between von Balthasar's texts brings to light how both Bonaventure and Rilke reject the Platonist ideal of traditional angelic anthropology. In formulating their alternative visions, they have many terms in common: heart, vulnerability, mortality, openness, abyss, suspension, transparency, receptivity, descent (kenosis), humility, poverty, etc. However, their meaning is different because Rilke does not recognize an absolute transcendence as the source of love and the vis-à-vis of the human. This immanentism leaves him no other option than the vain attempt to exorcize the angel figure altogether, while Bonaventure's vision preserves the angel as an anthropological mirror, be it an angel radically transfigured by God's wounded love.

Apart from the parallel in vocabulary, it is also striking how the paradoxes that run through Bonaventure's account on Francis' vision quoted above (the simultaneity of elevation and descent, joy and sadness, the weakness of the passion and the immortality of the Seraph) resemble those of Rilke. According to von Balthasar, the difference that changes everything is the framework of spousal love between God and humankind. Without this relational context our human condition, which combines transcendence and vulnerability, would make us tragic prisoners of a paradoxical, even contradictory existence.

A final significant parallel we found in our comparative analysis of von Balthasar's accounts of Rilke and Bonaventure is the key metaphor of the 'kiss'. In his interpretation of Rilke, von Balthasar himself does not refer to Bonaventure's nuptial metaphor, but to the reconciliation of sins as the ultimate embrace, sealed by another kiss.<sup>40</sup> Anticipating his *Theodramatik*, von Balthasar concludes his three-volume *Apokalypse* with a paraphrase of an allegorical play by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the Austrian author, who was buried wearing the habit of a Franciscan tertiary. In the latter's *Grosses Welttheater* (*The Great World Theater*), the closed world is opened and saved in a scene where a beggar gives a kiss to the earth and forgives the rich, despite the resistance of an angel against this act of communion. Rilke's melancholic kiss of the earth, von Balthasar writes, is redeemed by this kiss of the poor.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> An intriguing parallel could be elaborated with Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press 1994.

<sup>41</sup> See Balthasar. AddS III, pp. 442–449.

## Conclusion

Inspired by von Balthasar's interpretation of Rilke and Bonaventure, we presented a theological-anthropological perspective that, in contrast to the idealistic figure of the angel, integrates the paradoxes of human existence. Von Balthasar's theological critique of Rilke has illustrated the risk of a monological approach which tends to resolve the tension between immanence and openness, vulnerability and transcendence, ascension and descent, by erasing the distinctions between these polar concepts. Over against this Rilkean burial in immanence and an old (or new) dualistic flight from the world,<sup>42</sup> von Balthasar retrieves in Bonaventure a dialogical vision of being – everything is expression of the absolute expression, the Divine Word which expresses itself in all creatures, even in the unspeakable silence of Cross. Only the communion that embraces us from beyond in Bonaventure's 'kiss of the cross' is capable of delivering the heaviness of Rilke's 'kiss of the earth'. Von Balthasar invites us to look in the mirror of the crucified seraph and imagine a relational theological anthropology, which is truly redemptive.<sup>43</sup>

*Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies  
Catholic University of Leuven  
Sint-Michielsstraat 4/3101  
BE-3000 Leuven  
Belgium  
e-mail: yves.demaeseneer@kuleuven.be.*

---

<sup>42</sup> For a critique of secular angelic spirituality in consumer culture, see my article: Saint Francis versus MacDonald's: *Contemporary Globalization Critique and Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics*. *Heythrop Journal* 44 (2005), pp. 1–14.

<sup>43</sup> About how Bonaventure's vision, which presumes a certain medieval metaphysics, can make sense for us today, see the ground-breaking phenomenological work of Emmanuel Falque. *God, the Flesh, and the Other: From Irenaeus to Duns Scotus*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 2015, part III.