



## Kneeling in the Street: Recontextualizing Balthasar

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### Abstract

This paper supports the burgeoning movement that looks to find affinities between Hans urs von Balthasar's theology and various liberation theologies. It does so by offering a "recontextualization" of Balthasar's thought. Specifically, it provocatively looks to recontextualize Balthasar as a theologian of the street. The argument proceeds in three stages: First, the meaning of "context," and so the possibility of recontextualization, is discussed. While the term has become commonplace in contemporary "contextual theologies," the most rigorous analysis of context is found not in theology, but in literary theory. Second, the particular locale of this particular recontextualization is discussed: the street. As sign, the street is ideologically and metonymically overdetermined. Here, Derrida, Goizueta, and Maeseneer are given as examples of thinkers who think with or from the street, who are contextualized by the street. Finally, the paper turns to specific instances in Balthasar's text that demonstrate his street contextualization: namely, his criticism of Rahner's martyrless Christianity and his discussion of the saints, particularly Joan of Arc. This section rejects those claims, epitomized by Murphy, that Balthasar's name signs a totally conservative context, and so completes my project of freeing space for the aforementioned liberatory movement to continue blossoming.

### Keywords

Balthasar, Liberation theology, Contextual theology, Literary theory, Goizueta, Derrida, Maeseneer, Crammer

You have slain many in this city, *filled its streets with the slain*<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Ezek. 11:6.

*The chariots race madly in the streets / they rush wildly  
in the squares / their appearance is like torches / they dash to and fro  
like lightning flashes.<sup>2</sup>*

The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made from  
a single pearl; *and the street of the city was of pure gold, transparent  
as glass.<sup>3</sup>*

### *Exergue*

Joan of Arc, of Rouen: 1412–1431. Her pyre is an eternal beacon—  
Balthasar. Encounter? The appeal of Christ’s judging form, and  
Pilate’s judgment (judger/judged). Joan out of Orleans? Orleans  
signs Balthasar’s name. Today? Immolation asphyxiates. “I can’t  
breathe.” –street man, street culture. “And he burned because of  
the Church; because of all the sinners in Her.” *The graves stood  
tenantless and the sheeted dead did squeak and gibber in the Roman  
streets.*

### Introduction: Balthasar, contexts, the street

There is a movement afoot: A movement to create a “dialogue”  
between the theology of Hans urs von Balthasar and liberation the-  
ologies. This paper is an attempt to join that movement.

Already with this claim, I need to clarify some terms. First, it  
seems that there is an ironic tension between the plural “theologies”  
and the singular “movement.” Is it not better here to speak of move-  
ments in the plural, to match the plurality of theologies? My wager  
here is that this tension unveils not a contradiction but, in a move  
that inaugurates a theme of the paper, a plurality of contexts. Those  
interested in Balthasar’s liberatory potential have approached this en-  
gagement from “within” different “contexts”: feminist,<sup>4</sup> Latino/a,<sup>5</sup>  
neo-Marxist,<sup>6</sup> and so on. That is, various contextualized liberation  
theologies—be they feminist, Latino/a, Black, neo-Marxist, or what-  
ever else—approach the same goal, liberation from oppression, at dif-  
ferent moments and places, and with different exigencies and strate-  
gies. I am relying here on the work of Michael Ryan, for whom “it is  
possible to combine a sense of commonality amid diversity, firmness  
of resistance, and aggressivity of attack with a plurality of different

<sup>2</sup> Nah. 2:4.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. 21:21.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle Gonzalez, “Hans urs von Balthasar and Contemporary Feminist Theology,”  
*Theological Studies* 65 (3). 566-595.

<sup>5</sup> Roberto Goizueta, *Christ Our Companion* (Orbis, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Yves de Maeseneer, “Theological Truth in a Context of Aestheticisation: Research  
Memoranda on Hans urs von Balthasar and Theodor Adorno,” in *Theology and the Quest  
for Truth* (Leuven University Press, 2006).

struggles.” This diverse-yet-common attack is possible because, “materiality is plural and differentiated; it separates and multiplies, rather than forming identities that have a permanence akin to that of ideal forms which bear authority.”<sup>7</sup> That is, power and oppression manifest differently in different contexts. Complementarily, sites and strategies of resistance(s) ought to manifestly differently in different contexts. Eventually, it will be my goal to join this common resistance through a particular context, moment, and place: *the context of the street*. For now, we can note that it is not surprising, given Ryan’s analysis, that Balthasar can be read as offering an aesthetic critique of globalization (Maeseneer), as practicing a type of popular theology of the people (Goizueta), and also as articulating an oppressive and outdated one-sex anthropology (Crammer). This plurality is not (only) because of an inconsistency or complexity within Balthasar’s corpus, but is (also) because of a plurality of contextualized readings of Balthasar’s corpus.

I take it that these strategies self-reflexively work from within particularly defined and experienced contexts, and critically engage Balthasar’s thought in order to mine from it value. That is, they look to bring Balthasarian insights into their projects. This is most explicit in Maeseneer’s work, where Balthasar’s reading of Maximus the Confessor is made to help us distinguish—aesthetically—between corporate logos and the divine Logos.<sup>8</sup> In more critical cases, Balthasar’s conservatism is projected as an exemplary antithesis to a preferred approach. Here, Balthasar is used negatively in order to create critical distance from an unwanted trajectory, say, a one-sex anthropology.<sup>9</sup> Both of these strategies—appropriating the good, distancing from the bad—are fundamentally hermeneutic, insofar as they look to interpret Balthasar’s text for some other end. Without denying the inescapability of hermeneutics, my intention in this paper is thoroughly different than hermeneutic approaches: I do not want to interpret Balthasar’s text, I want to recontextualize it. That is, rather than engage Balthasar from some other context—feminist, Latino/a, Black, Marxist—I look to critique, cite, and “rewrite” Balthasar’s context. More precisely, I look to unsettle the notion that Balthasar’s signature is written in a basically conservative context—that the name “Balthasar” signs a conservative agenda. More precisely still, I want to recontextualize Balthasar as a theologian *of the street*. I have no desire to prove

<sup>7</sup> Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984). 216-217.

<sup>8</sup> Yves de Maeseneer, “Saint Francis Versus McDonald’s? Contemporary Globalization Critique and Hans urs von Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics,” *Heythrop Journal XLIV*. 1-14.

<sup>9</sup> Corrine Crammer, “One sex or two? Balthasar’s theology of the sexes,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

that this context more accurately coheres to Balthasar's intention. To privilege a coherence theory of truth, or a hermeneutics of authorial intent, would be, in fact, to privilege the resisted conservative context. My sympathy is not with Balthasar's (long dead, now cited) intent, but with those who read Balthasar with an eye toward liberation—with the common-yet-diverse resistance. My suggested context of the street, then, is meant as an offer both from within and to this resistance: I offer up this street context as a viable one, and as one that disrupts, challenges, even disrespects the conservative context that claims sovereignty over Balthasar's text, over Balthasar's name. In this way, this is a project not only of liberation theology, but of liberating Balthasar.

The paper will proceed in three parts. First, I will address what I mean by "recontextualization." This will necessarily involve a discussion of "context." With the popularization of so-called "contextual theologies," the word has become commonplace in contemporary theological discourse. However, an understanding of the relationship between text and context is too often taken for granted, and has been better worked out in literary theory than in systematic theology. This first section looks to partially fill that lacuna. Second, after defending and clarifying the project of recontextualization, I will look to defend and clarify the location of my recontextualization: the street. Metonymic use is unavoidable, but I intend the term literally: I am talking about real streets. To get clarity on this front, I will provide brief examples, which move progressively closer to Balthasar, and closer to the street: Derrida has described deconstruction as philosophy on the street, and so here we begin to see the relationship between thought and street; Goizueta has relied on Balthasar to perform theology from the street, and so we begin to see the relationship between Balthasar's aesthetics and the street; and Maeseneer, mentioned above, has done the most to bring Balthasar himself into the street—into the streets of the 1999 Seattle anti-globalization protests, and so we begin to see how Balthasar fares on the street. Third, after developing this framework, I will turn to Balthasar's text. While my operative intention is not coherence with Balthasar's intention, a street contextualization does find moments of coherent witness in Balthasar's text. As a thinker, he was neither totally speculative nor monastic: we need not forcefully throw him on to the street. I will linger on two moments: His dispute with Rahner over the categorical mediation of the transcendent, in which Balthasar holds that the transcendent is mediated in real, dramatic, historical events. This critique of Rahner will give rise to Balthasar's theology of sanctity and treatment of saints, especially Joan of Arc. All of which is to say: Balthasar wants his theology to be a kneeling theology. I will just have him kneeling in the street. Perhaps a street in Orleans. Perhaps a street in Seattle. The street.

## Part 1: Context, Recontextualized

This section has two aims: To clarify what is meant by context, and to clarify what a “recontextualization” could be.

First, then, let us take context. A concern, or even preoccupation, with “context” is not unique to theology. In fact, it might be representative of a general “cultural turn” in the humanities.<sup>10</sup> Yet, despite widespread acceptance of the importance of context,<sup>11</sup> there seems to be little reflexive understanding of what is meant by context: “There is very little explicit consideration of just what constitutes ‘context.’ In fact, ‘context’ often serves as a sort of explanatory black box.”<sup>12</sup> Context is *used* as an explanatory tool, without itself ever being understood, defined, or even questioned. Taking an example I have already relied on, to say that Goizueta’s work is “contextualized by his Latino experience,” is, with this vague explanatory understanding, only to say that Goizueta’s experience has, somehow, influenced his work. There is an explanatory black box, context, that links his experience (which is also his context) to his work. At its best, an attention to context—even in this unrefined state—can shed light on previously undisclosed, if not intentionally erased, experiences and voices. Those who use context in this way can even recognize the inescapability and importance of accounting for context in the reading of any text. Indeed, despite a lack of reflexive rigor regarding the term, there seems to be a vague sense that an appeal to context signals “a sensitivity towards the ways in which general processes are embedded, modified and reproduced in particular, local places.”<sup>13</sup> Taken on whole, this is an unobjectionable sensitivity.

A problem arises when the radical “embeddness” of those “general processes” is not appreciated. Such an under-appreciation would see not embedding, but something like complementarity or mediation. The temptation here is to create an unwarranted analogy, which would state the following: text is to context as inside is to outside. A more sophisticated version of a similarly forced analogy runs like this: text is to context as semantic intention is to syntactic spacing. In each case, there is a privileging of the most obviously present (text, inside, semantic intent) over the ostensibly absent or deferred

<sup>10</sup> J. Hillis Miller, “Derrida’s Politics of Autoimmunity,” *For Derrida* (Fordham University Press, 2009). 222-244.

<sup>11</sup> In theology, this acceptance seems to manifest in two different trajectories. There is the more self-reflexive inculturation tradition, as seen in Schreier’s *Constructing Local Theologies* (Orbis, 1985); and also the subtler appeal to context in the explicitly hermeneutic theologies modeled after Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy, as articulated in Joy’s collection, *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative: Context and Contestation* (University of Calgary Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Clive Barnett, “Deconstructing Context: Exposing Derrida,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24 (3). 277-293.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

(context, outside, semantic spacing). The problem here is that such a hierarchical privileging essentializes the derivative nature of the absent or deferred.<sup>14</sup> Eventually, such essentialism occludes the possibility of anything like reading: If a text is mediated by its outer “context,” then an understanding of context would be necessary to read the text. The clearest exposition of why this understanding is problematic is found in Derrida’s “Aphorism Countertime,” his reading of *Romeo and Juliet*.<sup>15</sup> Here, Derrida notes that his ability to read Shakespeare is not dependent upon a total familiarity and comprehension of Shakespeare’s historical “context.” Not only is such historical criticism never entirely exhaustible; more importantly, the demand for historical reflection denies the obvious fact that anybody, *anybody with the ability to read the language, translated or “original” of the text*, with or without historical training, can (and does) pick up and read *Romeo and Juliet*. The imposition of historical criteria preserves the text’s inaccessibility, and preserves an allegedly true, pure, intentional meaning. That is, the historical appeal says that the original “context” is the correct context. This is unacceptable for the theological movement I am interested in. If this theory were correct, then the various contextual theologies interested in Balthasar—who was neither feminist, nor Latino, nor Black, nor neo-Marxist—would, in order to “correctly” read his text, have to surrender their concerns and experiences in favor of his. Clearly, this is not only prescriptively undesirable, but descriptively false: plenty have, and do, read Balthasar without admitting this surrender.

This is not to deny that a historical, contextual understanding will somehow change one’s reading (but we should hesitate to say “aid” one’s reading). Arguably, this structural view gives more “credit” to the role of history in textual formation than does a pure historicism: To stay with “Aphorism Countertime,” Shakespeare’s historical context is always inseparable from the text, is carried with the text through time, regardless of one’s formal historical education. The “general processes” of Shakespeare’s context are so “embedded” in the text that they constitute the “structurality of the structure” of the text: family structures, the relationship between love and societal norms, the value of a name—these are historically conditioned, contextual traits that form the dramatic structure of the play.<sup>16</sup> The brilliant South African literary theorist Derek Attridge has articulated this relationship between text and context even more concretely and

<sup>14</sup> Thus, contra the above ideal wherein the erased are made legible, here the absence of the absent is reified.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Aphorism Countertime,” trans. by Nicholas Royle, in *Acts of Literature* (Routledge, 1992). 414-434. Also: “This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” trans. by Derek Attridge, *ibid.* 33-75.

<sup>16</sup> *Acts of Literature*, 64.

dramatically: “Context is already there in the words—in so far as they are words and not sounds or shapes.”<sup>17</sup> That is, a historical context not only shapes and constructs a text’s form—as above where 16<sup>th</sup> century English societal structures articulate the dramatic form of *Romeo and Juliet*. More minutely, the text *qua* text is immediately “contextualized” as soon as it is written, as soon as it involves itself in the system of signs that is its written language. Moreover, thinking now not of *texts* but of *books*, the *work* is contextualized by various aesthetic regimes, economic forces, and institutional pressures and demands; or better, these contextual factors articulate and form a text, which is inseparable from these factors.

The project of a contextual reading of Balthasar, then, would critically evaluate the constitutive role of linguistic, cultural, political, and societal forms in the construction of his text. It could, for example, demonstrate Balthasar’s reliance on German puns and gendered grammar, perhaps especially in his theology of sexuality.<sup>18</sup> It could also demonstrate that his reading of German idealism has led to an “intrinsicist” or “organicist” aesthetics of the symbol that coheres more directly than postmodern semiology to the daily, lived experiences of Latino/a people, especially their experience of Juan Diego.<sup>19</sup> But what is going on here? What type of reading, what type of theology, is occurring? To say that these approaches are “contextual” can no longer mean that they demonstrate exclusive concern with their own “proper” context. If a text is truly inseparable from its context, as this section has argued, then these contextualized approaches cannot merely appropriate traits or moments from Balthasar’s ostensibly decontextualized, pure text and place it within their own context, unchanged, unmarked—there is no pure, nude Balthasarian text to be approached and read, and there is no free trade at the level of the sentence and concept between contexts, a trade that would transpire through some neutral cognitive, hermeneutic medium. In the examples at the beginning of this paragraph, which are not imagined, we see authors privileging “their own” demands and epistemologies—a legitimate enterprise, especially when done in the name of liberation—and using them to read Balthasar’s contextualized text. Crammer’s familiarity with gender theory allows her to detect the gendered linguistic structure of Balthasar’s text—a structure not accidental, but contextual, formative. Likewise, Goizueta’s experience with the “sacramental realism” of Juan Diego experiences finds and articulates in Balthasar an otherwise non-explicated organicist aesthetics of the symbol—an aesthetics not provisional, but contextual, formative.

<sup>17</sup> Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (Routledge, 2004), p114.

<sup>18</sup> Crammer, 96.

<sup>19</sup> Goizueta, 89.

In each of these cases, Balthasar's text is, in a sense, "recontextualized," but never "decontextualized." Crammer's feminist critical method recontextualizes Balthasar's text as an example of a problematic one-sex anthropology—and it does so by reading Balthasar's embedded and formative linguistic context. Likewise, Goizueta's realism recontextualizes Balthasar as a witness to the coherent superiority of an organicist aesthetic—and does so by reading Balthasar's embedded and formative German Idealist context. The recontextualization of Balthasar is made clearest by Maeseneer, who has made of Balthasar a theologian pertinent to anti-globalization protests—a context of which Balthasar was, by necessity, totally unaware—and has done so by appealing to Balthasar's spiritual formation. The difference, then, between the reader's context and the writer's context becomes muddled: every reading is a writing, every reading is a recontextualizing of a text that is always inseparable from the context that formed it. Indeed, to deny the absolute possibility of recontextualization is to haplessly defend an outdated and, frankly, indefensibly regressive hermeneutics of originalism: as all these examples demonstrate, the (always contextualized) text can be cited by any possible future context; the possibility of recontextualization is non-saturable.

My concern is that, in all of these instances, despite the always looming threat of citation and recontextualization, the possibility remains to see these recontextualizations as still secondary to or derivative of Balthasar's original, proper, intentional context. In the case of Balthasar specifically, whose conventionally accepted context is conservative and antithetical to liberation theologies, this derivative acceptance remains unacceptable: It will not do to accept a liberationist reading of Balthasar while also maintaining a sovereign "original" context underneath. As I have argued, I think maintaining this position would be a fundamental reading mistake, both prescriptively and descriptively. Yet, the possibility remains. So, my recontextualization will look to attack this possibility: it will recontextualize on the level of context; it will argue that Balthasar is not (only, necessarily) a conservative figure whose leftist appropriation must entail violence, but that Balthasar is (also, possibly) a radical theologian, contextualized by the street.

## Part 2: The street, in Context

The English word "street" is semantically overdetermined. When paired with "culture," in the racist neologism "street culture," the word does the work once done by biological racism,<sup>20</sup> and does

<sup>20</sup> Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004). Especially ch. 4: "The Failure of Multiculturalism and Color Blindness." 95-125.



so by associating moral depravity with those who constitute this alleged street culture—Blacks, Latinos, “thugs.”<sup>21</sup> Likewise, when paired with “people,” in the petite-bourgeois epithet “street people,” the word associates moral depravity, drug addiction, and laziness with economic destitution.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, “take to the streets” has become commonplace shorthand for (yet, a graphically longer version of) “protest.” After Trump’s inauguration, millions “took to the streets” in national Women’s Marches. Here, we are even told that “one in every 100 Americans took to the street.”<sup>23</sup> Clearly, not the same street, no singular street, but “the street.” And so, here, “the street” becomes a signifier that is both literal and metonymical: On the one hand, it refers to actual streets, for this is where protests occur (increasingly, these protests not only take *to* the street, but *take* the street). On the other, the signifier metonymically marks “the street” as the place of protest, as signifying much more than simply getting on to a street, of doing something on the street, of “taking it to” the street (in a similar way that “Washington D.C.” both refers to the actual geographical location, and to so much more).<sup>24</sup>

I have no desire to reiterate or countersign the racist and capitalist motivations and assumptions that undergird the epithets “street culture” and “street people.” Yet, I recognize that meaning is neither totally controllable nor determinable, and intention does not exhaust context. Thus, taking advantage of the overdetermined nature of “street,” I will note that “to take to the street” is, precisely because of these racist and capitalist epithets, to take to the street in solidarity with street people, and with street culture. In this way, contextualizing Balthasar in the street—making Balthasar take to the street—is to show his solidarity with and his concern for street people, for street culture. Better, and now relying on the work on “context” above, such a contextualization allows Balthasar’s text to be formed and

<sup>21</sup> See: Bill O’Reilly, “President Obama and the Race Problem,” *Talking Points*, (Fox News: July, 2013). Accessible: <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2013/07/23/bill-oreilly-president-obama-and-race-problem.html>. Or: Bill O’Reilly, “To Race Hustler Al Sharpton: Your Day is Done,” *Talking Points*, (Fox News: July, 2013). Accessible: <http://nation.foxnews.com/2013/07/30/oreilly-race-hustler-al-sharpton-your-day-done.html>. Both of these remarks—directed toward Obama and Sharpton, hardly exemplars of “street culture”—came in July, 2013, the month George Zimmerman was found not guilty on the charge of second degree murder for killing Trayvon Martin.

<sup>22</sup> See: John Stossel, “You Really Shouldn’t Give to These Street People,” *Fox Nation* (Fox News: July, 2012). Accessible: <http://nation.foxnews.com/john-stossel/2012/07/05/stossel-panhandles-prove-you-really-shouldn-t-give-these-street-people>.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Groskopf, “Headcount: One out of every 100 Americans took to the street for the Women’s March, according to estimates,” *Quartz* (Quartz: January 2017). Accessible: <https://qz.com/891978/womens-march-one-out-of-every-100-americans-took-to-the-street-according-to-estimates/>.

<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, the Merriam Webster dictionary includes entries for “street people” and “take to the street,” but not “street culture.”

structured by the concerns, experiences, and exigencies of these people and these cultures.

That is a formal description of what a street contextualization entails: taking the text to the street; showing the embeddedness of street culture and street people in the very constitution of the text, in the structure that allows “sounds and shapes” to become “words.” Yet, this remains rather abstract—it is still unclear how, exactly, a contextualization of the street differs from, say, the feminist or Latino/a contextualizations performed by Crammer and Goizueta. To gain some clarity on this front, I will provide three quick examples of philosophy and theology contextualized by the street. All of these examples will feature names already familiar to this paper—Derrida, Goizueta, Maeseener. That these authors produce texts that can, earlier, be read as examples of one context (anti-historicism, Latino/a liberation theology, neo-Marxism), and now be read as examples of another context (the street, for all of them), demonstrates again that the relationship between text and context is never sedimented or essentialized—it is basically open, iterable, citable, and dependent on reading/writing.

First, Derrida. In an infrequently cited text, Derrida describes deconstruction as a sort of regime of anti-fascist guerilla resistance:

When I was very young—and until quite recently—I used to project a film in my mind of someone who, by night, plants bombs on the railway: blowing up the enemy structure, planting the delayed-action device and then watching the explosion or at least hearing it from a distance. I see very well that this image, which translates a deep phantasmal compulsion, could be illustrated by deconstructive operations, which consist in planting discreetly, with a delayed-action mechanism, devices that all of a sudden put a transit route out of commission, making the enemy’s movements more hazardous. But the friend, too, will have to live and think differently, know where he’s going, tread lightly.<sup>25</sup>

Here, Derrida’s “deep phantasmal compulsion” is motivated by the French resistance’s work against the Nazi’s—and the lores he heard as a teenager in 1940s Algeria. The deconstructor, much like the French resistor, looks for tense and overdetermined fault lines in a crucial, logistical waypoint. For the French, this demands planting traps on railroads, secretly, unnoticed—a risky maneuver, and one only possible given the context of occupation. For Derrida, this demands soliciting and challenging a metaphysics of presence—and the western ontological tradition that defends an orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and “orthography” derivative of this metaphysics.<sup>26</sup> Here, we see

<sup>25</sup> J. Derrida and M. Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. by G. Donis (Cambridge, 2001), 51-52.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, “La Difference,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass: “...and to object to this on the basis of the oldest of metaphysical oppositions (for

how operations of the street—more precisely, of the railroad—inform Derrida’s articulation and self-understanding of deconstruction, perhaps his “signature” philosophical offering. We cannot say that dreams of mischievous, virtuous, anti-fascist rebels, using a sort of violence to counteract a more illegitimate violence, served as the original, inspiring instance of deconstruction—at the least, this would fail to account for how Derrida’s later development of deconstruction affects the ways he remembers these dreams, these lores. I am not after causal relationships. We can, though, note a basic contextualization in the sense developed above: embedded in deconstructive texts is Derrida’s Jewish-Algerian-French context, the context of resistance, movement, danger, and chance. Hopefully, by now, it is clear that I do not mean to say that these experiences emotionally affected Derrida, and led him to develop such a radical philosophy. Rather, Derrida’s philosophy, to use a Derridean concept, *carries* this context, these concerns, these streets.<sup>27</sup>

Next, and now moving closer to Balthasar, Goizueta. Goizueta’s *Christ our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation* looks to bring Balthasar’s aesthetics into critical dialogue with liberation theology, especially a Latino/a liberation theology informed—contextualized—by a popular theology of the people. In Goizueta’s view, the popular Catholicism practiced by Catholic Latino/as has more in common with an aesthetic, Balthasarian account of Christianity than it does an overly rationalistic, “post-Tridentine” Christianity more typically at home in Europe.<sup>28</sup> Formally, Goizueta’s text is primarily concerned with how a theology concerned with the perception of Christ’s form reflects the reality of Latino experience, and with how a reception of and conformation to this form demands liberatory practice. In all cases—perception, reception, conformation—Goizueta relies on what he calls “sacramental realism.” Finding in Balthasar’s aesthetics grounds for this realism, Goizueta claims that the beauty of Christ does not (only?) point toward some otherworldly beauty, but instead shines from the

example, by setting some generative point of view against a structural-taxonomical point of view, or vice versa) would be, above all, not to read what here is missing from *orthographical ethics*.” pg. 12. The relationship between *differance*, which Derrida calls a spelling mistake, a *sorte de grosse faute d’orthographe*, and a solicitation of all “ortho,” remains a basic Derridean trait.

<sup>27</sup> Also: Derrida’s autobiographical *Monolingualism of the Other; or, the prosthesis of origin*: “Do you hear me! Each time I write a word, a word that I love and love to write; in the time of this word, at the instant of a single syllable, the song of this new International awakens in me. I never resist it, *I am in the street at its call*, even if, apparently, I have been working silently since dawn at my table.” pg. 57. (Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> Goizueta, 68.

form itself: “the content does not lie behind the form, but within it.”<sup>29</sup> To make the point, Goizueta relies on a lived example:

Any religious faith that assumes that what presents itself as true may in fact be true will be either dismissed outright or politely tolerated as the simple (read ‘naïve’) faith of the people. Scholars may suggest that if the people really understood what is behind their religious practices, what their symbols and rituals really mean, they would know that their real concern is not God, or Jesus Christ, or Guadalupe, or Juan Diego, but the universal human need for cultural identity or human dignity or liberation or self-empowerment, all of which could just as easily be expressed—and are, in fact, expressed—in a myriad of other forms, other rituals, other religions.<sup>30</sup>

That is, what matters to those who believe in and pray to Juan Diego “are not the values that Juan Diego represents; what matters is Juan Diego himself.”<sup>31</sup> Juan Diego was a person, and the reality of his person makes possible the truth of the practices that have grown from the Juan Diego “event.” So, we are attracted to this event because of its reality, and its reality contextualizes our understanding of God: God is someone who acts by revealing Mary to someone like Juan Diego.

Here, we again see that a “contextual theology” is not the bringing of local concerns to a universal, neutral divine arena. Goizueta privileges the sacramental realism of Latino/a popular Catholicism, and does so over an ostensibly unreal, unpopular, rationalist European Tridentine Catholicism. God, *here*, is the sort of God where the language of personal experience—taken in a full and rich sense of “personal”—and intimacy are *real* descriptions of God. The street, the concerns and experiences of the street, the street where Juan Diego encountered Mary, informs the popular Catholic Latino/a understanding of God. That Goizueta sees Balthasar as developing theoretical justification—“sacramental realism”—for this popular, aesthetic Catholicism is perhaps our first evidence that Balthasar is, already, closer to the street than one might expect. Regardless, the primary point here is that Goizueta’s work demonstrates, more concretely than Derrida’s self-reflexive and nostalgic dreaming, the extent to which *the street*—here real, specific streets, moments on streets—can contextualize an entire theology.

Finally, and now closer to both Balthasar’s text and the sense of “street” I intend, Maeseneer. Yves de Maeseneer’s article “Saint Francis Versus McDonald’s? Contemporary Globalization Critique and Hans urs von Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics” is interested in

<sup>29</sup> Goizueta, 112.

<sup>30</sup> Goizueta, 89.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

globalist and anti-globalist appropriations of theological language, and how Balthasar's aesthetics can help us navigate these now-theological waters. According to Maeseneer, theological critiques of globalization that understand the appeal of corporate logos as "idolatry" misread the intimate phenomenon of corporate branding: logos are not perceived as idols—who would worship an idol?—but as icons.<sup>32</sup> The gaze of the corporate logo is, in fact, directed at us. This iconic nature of logos is exemplified when a logo, which represents a "brand," is literally "branded" onto bodies as a tattoo. Here, we have a corporate stigmata, where the seraphic Nike swoosh, to take one example, is branded onto the worshiping body.<sup>33</sup> In this way, anti-globalization protesters are self-styled "iconoclasts," not inquisitors. All of which is to say, in the context of corporate globalization, we have competing claims to transcendence and iconography. What is needed is not a critique of some "immanent frame" or logic of secular humanism—which, Klein and Maeseneer suggest, is not the logic of corporate globalization at all—but a way to differentiate between these claims to transcendence: "The target of the critique of ideology today is not so much the theoretical dogmas of the economic curia . . . Ideology in the contemporary context has to do with aesthetic processes of image building and consumer response."<sup>34</sup>

Maeseneer finds Balthasar's "objectivist" aesthetics helpful here. Maeseneer notes that for Balthasar, and we hear echoes of Goizueta, the subject is informed by its reception of the aesthetic object. Importantly, this is true in both the case of the form of Christ, and in the form of the Nike swoosh. Yet, still relying on Balthasar here, there is an "intrinsic difference" between these two forms of transcendence, between "Christ and Anti-Christ," between Cross and swoosh. That difference is both aesthetic and dramatic: The figure of Christ is passively objective, and does not impose its formation onto us (aesthetic), and is always open and obedient to the Father (dramatic). For Maeseneer, these Balthasarian insights serve as Christian critiques of forms of transcendence—even messianic transcendence—offered by corporate logos, which are incapable of such suffering (in fact, they cause and hide suffering in their sweatshops).<sup>35</sup>

What is most directly of interest for this paper is the way that Maeseneer has brought a contemporary problematic—globalization—to bear on Balthasar's text. Maeseneer—and Klein, on whom Maeseneer heavily relies—speak of globalization in terms of the late '90s and early '00s anti-globalization protests. This is, needless to say, a context with which Balthasar could not have been familiar. Yet,

<sup>32</sup> St. Francis vs. McDonald's, 3

<sup>33</sup> St. Francis vs. McDonald's, 9

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> St. Francis vs. McDonald's, 11

Maeseener finds Balthasar's text not only relevant, but supremely helpful in articulating an anti-corporate critique. Here we have an instance of Balthasar's text being read in a particular context, and producing unexpected and unpredictable fruit because of this reading (who could have guessed that Balthasar's aesthetics could critique the procedure of tattooing the Nike swoosh? Not Balthasar, this was not his intent). More specifically, we have here *the street* being brought to bear on Balthasar's text, and *the street* making Balthasar's text produce new insights, new fruit. For all the talk of claims to transcendence, we should not lose sight of the fact that these anti-globalization protests were manifestations of immanent exigencies: Broken windows, arrests, confrontations, violence. That corporate claims to transcendence reinforce economic destitution (through capitalistic malfeasance) and racial injustice (through capitalism, of course, but also racist marketing and advertising campaigns) only reinforces the notion that those who took to the streets in anti-globalization protests did so with and for street people and street culture, victims of that globalization to be protested.

Maeseener has forced Balthasar's text, via recontextualization, to answer questions—questions it never knew could be asked: Are these protests “in Christ,” or anti-Christ? And more basically still: You want to do theology from your knees. Will you kneel in the street? Maeseener has offered a reading of moments within Balthasar's text that answer these questions. Yet, the association of Balthasar with street protests remains curious, if not, to Balthasar's conservative following, inappropriate: Balthasar would have resisted this populism; Balthasar would have supported the notion that “liberalism and a market economy are based on Christianity,” and that capitalist exchange is just good, natural human role playing—role playing opened up by inner-Trinitarian drama.<sup>36</sup> For those who read in this context, Maeseener's use of Balthasar is dismissed as unconvincing, too particular, a bit of dishonest proof-texting. For that reason, for those people, I look to put the whole work on the street.

### Part 3: Balthasar, on the Street

So far, I have argued that a context is not derivative of or accidental to a text, but that a context is so “embedded” into a text that it forms, structures, and makes sense of the text. This is true historically (index: Derrida's reading of Shakespeare, and Goizueta's noticing of Balthasar's reliance on German aesthetic forms) and linguistically

<sup>36</sup> See: Francesca Murphy, “Is Liberalism a Heresy?” *First Things* (June, 2016). Accessible: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2016/06/is-liberalism-a-heresy>.

(index: Attridge's sounds and shapes that become words, and Cramer's critique of Balthasar's reliance on German puns). Then, I demonstrated what a "context of the street" could look like. Here, relying on our familiar cast of characters—who have each played many roles, there are no essential roles in this paper—I showed that the street can be carried with thought (Derrida), can contextualize concepts within thought (Goizueta's intimate God), and can recontextualize older texts that are not familiar with the street (Maeseneer's anti-globalization Balthasar). Yet, each of these approaches—Goizueta's and Maeseneer's, as well as various other "contextual theologies"—could still be seen as particular readings, accidental to the true substance of Balthasar's conservatively contextualized text. My remaining task, then, is to rebel against and undermine this conservative claim to universal sovereignty over Balthasar's text. My entry point into this task is Balthasar's critique of Rahner. There has been much written on this issue.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, a full discussion of this critique—its subtleties regarding nature and grace, history and freedom—would require a book, and books have been written. My intent here is not to summarize this critique, but to frame it in a new light: For Balthasar, Rahner is not street enough.

In his *Moment of Christian Witness*, Balthasar writes a short, polemical dialogue between "The Christian" and "The commissar." The Christian polemically represents a Rahnerian Christian: "We have recently become open to the world, and some of us even have become seriously converted to the world."<sup>38</sup> Balthasar's interest in the dialogue is to show an underlying, structural similarity between the commissar and the Rahnerian Christian. The Christian demonstrates contemporary, secular humanist values ("The main thing is the morality appropriate to the age"), and the commissar, who is "well-disposed," is named an anonymous Christian. This mutual acceptance, though, proves hollow. The commissar is not challenged by the Christian, and is not forced to repent for his party's inquisitorial regime. Neither, though, is the Christian forced to make any sort of *decision*. In Balthasar's most damning critique, the commissar judges the Christian, and Christianity, to be untroublesome, unworthy of his time: "You have liquidated yourselves." Rahnerian Christianity, with its passive acceptance of the morality of the age (which, Balthasar was all too well aware, could turn brutal), is no

<sup>37</sup> Some examples: Philip Endean, "Von Balthasar, Rahner, and the Commissar," *New Blackfriars* 79 (293), 33-38. Declan Marmion, "Rahner and His Critics: Revisiting the Dialogue," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 4. Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology* (SCM Press, 2007). 86-106.

<sup>38</sup> Hans urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, trans. by Richard Beckley (St. Ignatius Press, 1994). pg.

Christianity worthy of the name; it is a self-liquidating Christianity; it is a martyrless Christianity.

The critique is furthered in Balthasar's reading of Rahner's soteriology.<sup>39</sup> Balthasar is unhappy that Rahner makes the Incarnation "only one 'species,' one sector, within an overall history of revelation."<sup>40</sup> That is, Balthasar is weary of making Jesus an example, even if a supreme example, of a necessary transcendental structure—one in which the "hypostatic union is so deeply involved with concrete human nature."<sup>41</sup> As opposed to this, Balthasar wants a soteriology that gives full weight to Jesus's decisive "hour" on the Cross—that moment wherein the drama of salvation is opened, and humanity is forced to choose whether or not to be "in Christ." Jesus, for Balthasar, is not an example of the supernatural dimension common to generic humanity, but opens and allows for that dimension.<sup>42</sup> All of which is to say, for Balthasar, "Rahner's soteriology lacks the decisive dramatic element."<sup>43</sup> Put more philosophically, we could say that, "for Rahner, God always transcends objects in space and time: we know God only in and through them, as their permanently mysterious, elusive ground."<sup>44</sup> For Balthasar, such talk basically misplaces the urgency of mediation: God is not passively mediated through transcendental structures of consciousness and being, but through the hour of Christ's death, and through our decision to follow or not in Christ's wake—our decision to give or refuse witness.

Or, such talk basically *misplaces* the *context* of mediation. Already we can see that Balthasar's Christocentrism is a Christological contextualization of soteriology: soteriology is informed not by human needs and desires—although it coheres to these—but by Christ's revelatory and decisive action. Not that Rahner's soteriology is not also contextualized by Christ: The point here, the point relevant to the street, is not a simple and quick claim that Balthasar is "Christocentric" and Rahner is not. Rather, Rahner's Christocentrism is deeply entwined with transcendental structures and a basically open human nature. For Balthasar, this sort of Christocentrism will not do: Balthasar's talk of "the hour" makes clear that his soteriology is informed not by a universal structure, but by a decisive theo-historical moment. Human freedom is confronted with Christ's decisive hour, and cannot escape this contextualization: Obey it, and experience the

<sup>39</sup> Hans urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory; Volume IV: The Action*, trans. by Graham Harrison (Ignatius Press, 1994). 273-284.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.* 274.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.* 283.

<sup>42</sup> I am not here interested in the accuracy of Balthasar's critique, but in the formal and strategic work it does.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Endean, 33.



fullness of divine love; or do not obey it, sin, and experience hell. Balthasarian soteriology walks the street to Calvary, and asks us if we will stay there.

On the one hand, this seems to cohere with what Balthasar is after in his aesthetics, wherein the form is both perceived and received, and so conforms us to itself in freedom. But more concretely, Balthasar understands this contextualization to be demonstrated by the saints. Turning to the saints prevents the possibility of a domestication of Balthasar's soteriology—resists turning sanctity into a sort morality-of-the-age-humanism critiqued by the commissar dialogue (it resists, for instance, a morality-of-the-age humanism that looks to baptize neo-liberal economics, and uses vague Balthasarian dramatic categories to do so [index: Murphy, whose non-reading of the street context amounts to an incomplete reading of the Balthasarian text, if not to a counterfeit countersigning of his chimeric signature]). Here, following Ignatius, Balthasar declares:

The true mystery of Christian revelation is this: the perfection of the kingdom of God can be pursued as the universal operation of God in the active co-operation of the creature . . . This co-operation can no longer remain at the level of indifference in the sense of merely letting things happen; no, the particular will of God, which is to be actively grasped and carried out, must also be actively pursued.<sup>45</sup>

To be contextualized by Christ's decisive hour is to perform "specific deeds in an active apostolate of service to neighbor." These specific acts of service, as demonstrated by the lives of the saints, can call for the ultimate act of martyrdom. Balthasar's study of Reinhold Schneider, *Tragedy Under Grace*,<sup>46</sup> offers a meditation on such saintly martyrdom—a meditation that will bring us firmly into the street, perhaps never to leave.

In this work, Balthasar is concerned with the ways in which theological exigencies—doubt, sin, faith, confession, mission—"turn in us" and so have historical impact.<sup>47</sup> Balthasar, reading Schneider, sees this "turn" as leading to "encounters" between saints and kings, between church and state, between heaven and hell. The origin of this turning, the primal encounter, is Christ's with Pilate: "This encounter took place once and for all when the eternal truth in human form stood before Pilate."<sup>48</sup> Here, Jesus, who is ostensibly the one judged, is in fact, through the purity and blameless beauty of his life, judging

<sup>45</sup> Hans urs von Balthasar, "The Metaphysics of the Saints," in *The Glory of the Lord Volume V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* (Ignatius Press, 1991). pg. 105.

<sup>46</sup> Hans urs von Balthasar, *Tragedy Under Grace: Reinhold Schneider on the Experience of the West*, trans. by Brian McNeil (Ignatius Press, 1997).

<sup>47</sup> *Tragedy Under Grace*, 111.

<sup>48</sup> *Tragedy Under Grace*, 195.

Pilate—and judges him guilty. This judgment is witnessed to in every historical, martyrlly encounter between saint and king: “The one who possesses power looks the saint in the face and, through him, looks the truth in the face: power and grace stand eye to eye; the history of the world holds its breath.”<sup>49</sup> The transcendent is mediated in such encounters, not in transcendental structures. This encounter is the witnessing of Christian faith that Balthasar demands, and it is here that the “perfection of the kingdom of God” can be pursued in active co-operation with Christ’s blameless resistance of Pilate’s power politics regime: Pursuing the kingdom in co-operating with Jesus resisting the king.

When they do this, the saints live as “the real symbols of the kingdom of God,” and become “a power in history.”<sup>50</sup> Joan of Arc “remains the most expressive” witness we have: “She herself is a commission, a mission, the burden of a responsibility that holds spellbound the one chosen and makes demands that go as far as her blood. The space into which she is directed to go is demarcated: this task, and no other; this particular grace, to be used in this way.”<sup>51</sup> By so specifying Joan’s mission—which is to die at the hands of an inquisitorial and occupying English state—Balthasar is not claiming that God demands our suffering. No: she “burned because of the Church, because of all the sinners in Her.”<sup>52</sup> For, Joan was tried not (just) for her resistance to the English state, but (more explicitly) for her alleged heresy. Yet, also in this way, she “burned for the Church”—to correct it and judge it, as Christ did Pilate. The divine light had fell to a dark shimmer in the world. And so Joan’s pyre, says Balthasar, became an eternal beacon.<sup>53</sup>

It is with Joan that we see what Balthasar means by a kneeling theology: A theology that obeys God, and is willing to resist not only the king, but the Church in doing so. Throughout *Tragedy Under Grace*, Balthasar makes clear that Joan, and the other saints mentioned, are operating from a religious, “Christocentric” place: It is in prayer that one can “throw his heart into the battle before God.”<sup>54</sup> Yet, we see here that Joan’s mission, given in prayer and created by and in Christ’s decisive hour, was a momentous, historical mission. It was a mission performed by a woman, an active and militaristic woman, possibly a gender non-conforming woman with, speaking anachronistically, psychic abnormalities common to society’s margins.<sup>55</sup> And

<sup>49</sup> *Tragedy Under Grace*, 194.

<sup>50</sup> *Tragedy Under Grace*, 188.

<sup>51</sup> *Tragedy Under Grace*, 187.

<sup>52</sup> *Tragedy Under Grace*, 192.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Tragedy Under Grace*, 111.

<sup>55</sup> Deborah Fraioli, *Joan of Arc: The Early Debates* (Boydell Press, 200). 126-150.

so, we are perhaps close to Crammer's contextual concerns, which gave rise to a criticism of gender essentialism and a one-sex anthropology. It was a mission of a popular, ethnic Catholicism looked at as superstitious and heretical by outsiders. And so, we are perhaps close to Goizueta's contextual concerns, which wanted to demonstrated an affinity between Balthasar's aesthetics and popular Catholicisms. It was a mission to resist an occupying power—a power interested in, among other things, trade and resource exploitation.<sup>56</sup> And so, we are perhaps close to Maeseneer's contextual concerns, which already saw in Balthasar a resistance to economic exploitation and domination, and saw this resistance occurring on the street. Joan's mission sent her to the street—sent her to fight on the street, to die on the street; sent by the street leading to and from Calvary, a street she never left, a street on which we read Balthasar.

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<sup>56</sup> CT Allmand, *The Hundred Years War* (Cambridge University Press, 1989). 6-28.