Kenosis & Ascent

The Trajectory of the Self in the Writings of John Milbank and Rowan Williams

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Contents

Certification of Authorship vii

Acknowledgements ix

Abstract xi

Introduction 1
  Kenosis 2
  Ascent 5
  The Self: Embodied Soul and Ensouled Body 8
  Culture 10
  Why John Milbank and Rowan Williams? 12
  Chapter Summaries 13

1. Lost Souls? Contemporary Narratives of the Self 17
  Williams’ Narrative of the Modern Self 18
  Milbank’s Genealogy of the Secular Self 23
  Retrieving the Language of the Soul 29
  Conclusion 37

2. Re-imagining the Self I: Pre-modern Trajectories 39
  Re-reading Gregory of Nyssa 41
    Milbank’s Gregory: The Self and ‘Active Reception’ 41
    Williams’ Gregory: The Self – A Vocation of Desire 46
  Re-reading Augustine 54
    Williams and Augustine: The Self and God, Language and Desire 54
    Milbank and Augustine: The Sociality of the Self 65
  Re-reading Pseudo-Dionysius 69
    Williams and Pseudo-Dionysius: Static Iconography or Dynamic Relationality? 70
    Milbank: Dionysius and the Theurgic and Hierarchical Self 72
  Conclusion 78
3. **Re-Imagining the Self II: Modernity Contested**  
   Williams and Hegel: The Self, Dialectic and Dispossession 81  
   *Hegel and the Post-modern Self* 83  
   *The Self and 'Infinite Relatedness'* 85  
   *The Self of the 'Broken Middle'* 86  
   *The Self and God: Contradiction or Correlation?* 88  
   *Hegel and the Tragic Self* 90  
   Milbank, Vico and the Poetic Self 99  
   *Vico and the Cartesian Self* 100  
   *The Self, Language and Violence* 103  
   *The Subversion of Plato and a New Vision for the Modern Self* 107  
   *Vico’s Autobiography and the Vichian Self* 108  
   *Milbank, Rose and the Utopian Self?* 109  
   Conclusion 118  

4. **Arenas of the Soul: Conflicting Visions for the Church?** 121  
   The Church as Counter-Narrative 123  
   The Surprising Newness of Orthodoxy 130  
   The Church: Gift, Sacrament and Sign 136  
   The Bishop: Theurgic Practitioner and Kenotic Witness 145  
   The Church and the Self: Cross and Glory 150  
   Conclusion 153  

5. **Infinite Displacement, Infinite Ascent: The Kenotic and Theurgic Self** 157  
   Williams and the Kenotic Self 158  
   *Dostoevsky and the Self as Author* 159  
   *T. S. Eliot and the Self Abandoned in Time* 164  
   *The Self, Trinity, Confrontation and Desire* 167  
   Milbank and the Theurgic Self 171  
   *The Self and Repetition* 172  
   *The Poetic Self* 175  
   *The Trans-Organic Self* 184  
   Conclusion 187  

Conclusion 191  

Bibliography 195
Certification of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis.

Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged. I agree that this thesis be accessible for the purpose of study and research in accordance with the normal conditions established by the Executive Director, Library Services or nominee, for the care, loan and reproduction of theses.

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Abstract

This work is a piece of constructive theology that explores the thought of Rowan Williams and John Milbank in charting the progress and dislocations of the self: its contemporary expressions, its premodern versions and future projections. In this thesis the self is seen to be constructed through a new emphasis on culture – language, relationality, history and community – and gift. Indeed, the very giftedness of the self is to be discerned in the ‘constructedness’ of its identities as it encounters the eternal in time and in history and gift is discovered through the limits of human language and desire. The twin themes of kenosis and ascent shape the argument in each chapter as this thesis moves from contemporary iterations of the self, back into patristic visions of the self, into a dialogue with Vico and Hegel, and finally into the practice of the Church as ‘an arena of the soul’ and the self’s distance from and mirroring of the Trinity. In this theological portrait of the self, a new kind of ‘human making’ (culture) is imagined that is both kenotic and theurgic, as human articulations of the self echo and anticipate the creative activity of the divine.
“Philosophy, as I understand and practice it, renews Socrates’ search to explore the analogies between the soul, the city and the sacred.”

Gillian Rose, *Paradiso*
Introduction

In Gregory of Nyssa’s *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, he comments on the phrase ‘let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.’¹ The encounter between the bride and bridegroom take place for Gregory in the context of the *epektasis* of the soul, the infinite expansion of human desire as it is ignited with God’s own desire and filled with divine life. Martin Laird detects a double movement here: ‘the ascent to union with the Word beyond all thought and word,’ and yet also ‘the descent of the Word into the world of deeds and discourse.’² This movement – one of ascent and descent – is from words about God to words that are full of God. Gregory wants to ‘refuse to allow concepts and speech to grasp the divine essence,’³ but also to allow a new kind of speech, a kind of ‘doxologic’⁴ that is imbued with the transformative power of the Logos.

This double movement of Gregory’s *epektasis* provides the dynamics of this thesis: a self-emptying movement which is a refusal of ‘system-spinning,’⁵ a movement away from language, desire and identity as a means of autonomy or control; and a movement of ascent into a new kind of language and desire that shapes a new world of meaning and anticipates the abundant excesses of the Logos. It could be simplistically alleged that Rowan Williams’ theological project embodies the first of these movements and that John Milbank articulates the second, but this thesis will instead ask whether their theological projects combine both aspects even as their articulations are different. Could it

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³ Ibid.
⁵ Rowan Williams, “The Four Quartets” (1975), lecture 2, 2.
be that Milbank’s poetic theology can only be practiced under the ‘sign of the cross,’ or that Williams’ kenotic theology is, in its own way, an articulation of the divine excesses of the Trinity? These questions will be considered in each chapter as this double movement is discussed first in terms of a theological understanding of the self (constructed in conversation with Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius), second in an outworking of what might be termed a cultural-philosophical understanding of the self (alongside Vico and Hegel), third through an ecclesiological performance of the self, and finally as the self confronts the mystery of the Trinity. Before giving a summary of each chapter it is necessary to make some comments regarding the key themes of kenosis, ascent, the self, and culture, and to address why I have written my thesis in conversation with these two particular theologians.

Kenosis

It would be impossible to consider the theme of kenosis without mentioning the so-called Philippians Hymn.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 
who, though he was in the form of God, 
did not regard equality with God 
as something to be exploited, 
but emptied himself, 
taking the form of a slave, 
being born in human likeness. 
And being found in human form, 
he humbled himself 
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. 

Therefore God also highly exalted him 
and gave him the name 
that is above every name, 
so that at the name of Jesus 
every knee should bend, 
in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 
and every tongue should confess 
that Jesus Christ is Lord, 
to the glory of God the Father.7

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7 Philippians 2.5-11 NRSV.
Putting aside questions of authorship and form, what is important here is the theological meaning of the passage. I want to concentrate on four possible exegetical trajectories of the hymn, and, rather than settle on one single meaning, take a more ’patristic’ approach and allow the layers of meaning to sit side by side and allow as many voices as possible within the text.

There is a certain ’mimetic’ quality to the hymn in which the Philippian community are to imitate Christ – to have the same mind as him – even as Christ’s life takes on a particular pattern. Dunn pushes this mimesis further, suggesting an embedded Adamic Christology in the hymn in which Christ performs a subversive and transformative imitation of Adam.8 Here the contrast is between two visions of the human self. The first, Adam, who grasps at the royal image of God in humanity and who eschews the gift of wisdom for the technological mastery of the world through knowledge and language. The second, Christ, receives the gift of the divine image through a humble obedience and the endurance of the cross. Fowl rejects this Second Adam Christology and instead connects the kenotic movement of the hymn to the Suffering Servant of Second Isaiah.9 I believe it would be better to hold these allusions in tension, especially if the royal context of both Old Testament narratives is noted. In Second Isaiah the Suffering Servant is in some mysterious sense the return of the king to Zion, and yet this return is paradoxically one of weakness and seeming defeat, a reversal of the enthronement poetry of the psalms. In both these cases questions of identity, power and politics are not far under the surface.

The third suggestion is that this passage speaks of a cosmic kenosis and ascent. The pre-existence of Christ is affirmed in this model and kenosis comes to be about the emptying of Christ’s divinity. What is significant here is the suggestive possibility that ’Christ’s emptying reveals something about the nature of God – that emptying is a fundamental character of the divine.’10 I will return again and again to this suggestion – and to the corresponding suggestion that emptying is therefore also a fundamental char-

9 Stephen E. Fowl, Philippians (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).
acter of the self – in the following chapters. The fourth exegetical move is a contextual one focussing on the political implications of kenosis of the hymn. Arguing for a prominent presence of Roman Imperial power in the city of Philippi means that writing about Christ’s acceptance of the form of a slave and his going to the cross plays dangerously with notions of political power and the imperial matrix of honour and shame. Could it be that kenosis is an exposure of the political, the systems of governance and control that enclose every human self? Wortham argues in a similar vein that a status reversal is liturgically enacted by the hymn, as ‘an enslaved God becomes an agent of liberation.’ And yet others detect a clear allusion in the hymn to Roman Imperial claims of equality with God, which are now being subverted by this liturgical form of resistance. Each of these four exegetical understandings of the hymn – that it embeds a Second Adam Christology, that it alludes to Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, that it speaks of divine self-emptying, that it encodes resistance to the Roman Imperial cult – can, and should, be held in creative tension. In each case questions of identity, power, freedom, mimesis and the proximity and distance of the human and divine remain at the forefront. These themes are fundamental to the arguments I follow in this thesis.

Before I leave the question of divine kenosis and the Philippians hymn, I want to make mention of Gregory of Nyssa’s section in his Address on Religious Instruction in which he writes about the union of God’s goodness, wisdom, justice and power in the Incarnation. This is useful as it combines an understanding of kenosis and power with a sense of the mobility of the human self. Gregory begins by suggesting that no attribute of God can be separated from another. ‘Power,’ he argues, ‘if it is separated from justice and wisdom, cannot be classed as virtue.’ It is this axiom that will lead Gregory in his consideration of the incarnation, the coming together of God’s power with human weakness. Gregory goes on to talk about the image of God in the human self, arguing that it is fundamentally mobile. “The difference between the one made “in the image” and the archetype lies in this: that the latter by nature is not subject to change, while the former is.”

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13 Ibid., 297.
again is Gregory’s doctrine of *epektasis*, the constant movement of the soul. As the soul moves towards the good it discovers an infinity ‘since there is no conceivable limit to the distance it can go,’ but the soul’s journey can also be diverted downwards towards non-being. And thus for Gregory it is the mobility of the human self – between infinity and nonbeing – that provides the necessary context for the incarnation. Gregory generates a compelling paradox between power and kenosis as he considers the incarnation of the Word made flesh. ‘That the omnipotent nature was capable of descending to man’s lowly position is a clearer evidence of power than great and supernatural miracles.’ Balthasar puts it forcefully, ‘the *paradox* must be allowed to stand: in the undiminished humanity of Jesus, the whole power and glory of God are made present to us.’ Kenosis becomes nothing less than the demonstration of the power and purpose of God, a power made perfect in weakness.

Ascent

The language of ascent in this thesis finds its roots in the Christian Neoplatonic tradition, even as it branches out into radically new contexts. To orientate the reader in what is to come, three ‘Platonic’ ascents can be highlighted, but what is of most significance is the way in which the Christian tradition plays with, questions, subverts and re-imagines such mythologies of ascent. And, once more, this playful subversion and re-imagination will be encountered on almost every page of this work. The first ascent is that of the charioteer in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, the second is Plotinus’ notion of ascent, and the third is Iamblichus and the theurgic ascent of the soul.

In Plato’s dialogue, *Phaedrus*, Socrates speaks to his friend Phaedrus in what has been called ‘a creative multilayered intellectual encounter.’ The warnings at the end of the

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14 Ibid., 298.
15 Ibid., 300.
17 It would be possible here to generate a discussion on kenoticism in modern theological writings such as Kathryn Tanner’s *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 1-34. However, my engagement with kenoticism in this thesis is not so much in terms of Christology or modern theological conceptions of kenoticism *per se*, but rather in order to develop a distinct conception of kenosis to explore contemporary theories of the self.
dialogue, that a written work can never convey real knowledge due to its repetitive rigidity and only the soul can know true knowledge due to its 'endless capacity to express, interpret, and reinterpret itself,' remind the reader not to rush to a too early closure of meaning in what is again a polyvalent text. In a conversation about divine madness and the erotic, Socrates explains 'the truth about the nature of the soul.' In what is a beautiful image, the soul is imagined as 'the natural union of a team of winged horses and their charioteer.' The souls of the gods are in perfect harmony and so ascend easily and finally 'gaze upon what is outside heaven.' Mortal souls have two contrasting winged horses, the first 'beautiful and good,' but the second head-strong and wilful, and so their chariot-driving is 'a painfully difficult business.' As the horses pull in opposite directions, the souls rise and fall in what resembles a 'terribly noisy, very sweaty, and disorderly' chariot race. Finally, the souls fall back into their bodies, but the 'level' of humanity that they fall into depends upon the amount of 'reality' they have seen and remembered from the race, how high they had ascended. First is the philosopher or the lover, and at the bottom of the pile is the sophist and the tyrant. Socrates argues that for the philosopher’s mind to grow wings once again, it is to be possessed by a kind of divine madness that shakes them out of the enclosure of embodiment and allows them to see the beauty of the material as a mere echo or reminder, a jolt of memory, of the reality that their soul once knew. For Plato, it seems, ‘there, in “the place beyond the heavens,” the soul achieves its homecoming.’ Ascent for Plato is made possible through ‘recollection,’ problematised through the warring powers of intellect and passion (the two horses of the charioteer), and enabled or frustrated by human embodiment.

The second ascent is found in the writings of Plotinus. Plotinus’ philosophy can be understood both as a cosmic hierarchy but also as an introspective movement of the self. Plotinus sees reality in terms of three principles: the One, nous or Intelligence, and Soul.
These three are related in a process of emanation and return: an ecstatic overflow of the One into Intelligence, and of Intelligence into Soul, which is met by a return as all things desire to return to the Good. For Plotinus this is not so much a myth of creation as 'an attempt to understand how things eternally are.' This cosmological vision can be translated into the life of the self or soul and is best articulated in Plotinus’ most infamous statement about the ascent of the soul as ‘the flight of the alone to the Alone’ or ‘the passing of the solitary to the Solitary.’ As Louth succinctly puts it, ‘as the soul ascends to the One, it enters more and more deeply into itself: to find the One is to find itself.’ Once more in this schema, something has been forgotten and is remembered through contemplation, which is itself a movement away from the material as the soul remembers its unity with the One. This is the ‘turn inward in order to go upward’ that Milbank constantly questions and critiques throughout his entire oeuvre.

The third and final ascent is the paradoxical descent and ascent of the soul found in the writings of the later theurgic Neoplatonist Iamblichus. Unlike Plotinus, Iamblichus did not believe that the soul could ascend to the One through contemplation alone because the soul had now fully descended into the body and had lost its affinity for the One. For Iamblichus the intellectual power of the human soul had therefore been severely compromised. Iamblichus instead invokes a theurgic rather than contemplative ascent in which ritual action becomes more significant than theoretical knowledge. The most significant passage is found in his De Mysteriis Book II, section 11, where he argues that,

> it does not follow that the offerings made to the gods and divine works are invalid, for it is not pure thought that united theurgists to the gods. Indeed, what then would hinder those who are theoretical philosophers from enjoying a theurgic union with the gods? But the situation is not so: it is the accomplishment of acts not to be divulged and beyond all conception, and the power of unutterable symbols, understood solely by the gods, that establishes theurgic union.  

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It is the descent of the gods into the material through liturgical invocation that now makes the ascent of the soul possible. This theurgic ascent, condemned by Augustine as magic\(^{32}\) and transposed by Pseudo-Dionysius into a new sacramental key,\(^{33}\) becomes a significant thread in Milbank's own trajectory of the self.

Such 'ascents' are questioned and redeployed in each chapter. Plato's understanding of 'recollection' is transfigured so that it becomes an eschatological movement forward, a liturgical repetition that is itself a creative anticipation of the divine craft. Plotinus' lonely ascent is re-imagined as a movement outwards in ecclesial sacramentality and virtue, and instead of an ascent away from the material will be reconceived as a shaping of the material. Most significantly, Iamblichus' theurgic ascent is given full sacramental articulation as the magical manipulation of the powers is translated into the cultural and historical shaping of the human. In each case the ascent of the soul – now articulated in terms of embodiment, particularity and language – is only made possible by the incarnational descent of God into the fleshy textures of human culture.

**The Self: Embodied Soul and Ensouled Body**

Throughout this thesis the language of the self is employed. It is important here to set some markers of meaning for 'the self' for both Williams and Milbank. Following Merleau-Ponty, both theologians see the body as existing towards the material world.\(^{34}\) It is through language that we recognise that 'the oddity of this material reality that is my body is an oddity shared by other recognizable bodies.'\(^{35}\) Both self and other become a site from which an intelligent charting of the world takes place. Williams and Milbank argue that this is a contemporary articulation of Aquinas, and so it becomes axiomatic that 'the body is the soul – that is, the body does not become intelligent, purposeful, endowed with feeling and so on because something is added to it. This is what the body is – a *meaning* portion of matter.'\(^{36}\) Or as Milbank puts it, 'thinking of a world altogether

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36 Ibid.
outside the way it makes itself known to us makes no sense.’\textsuperscript{37} Both language and relation constitute the life of the soul as bodily activities and it is here that we can locate the significance of culture for both these theologians. As Williams puts it, ‘we are already embroiled in speech and relation, and so in culture – in the life of the soul.’\textsuperscript{38} Culture, language and relation are not something that are added to the human self, but something that constitute its very meaning, its very existence.

Already there can be discerned a movement of \textit{kenosis} and \textit{ascent}. As the body orients itself in and towards its world, it must make space for that world and for others that form part of it. It must de-centre itself in order to allow the other perspective the space it needs. More than this, the body is orientated towards its world in terms of wonder and gift, beyond mere utility and control, as it finds itself in the ‘harmonies’ of its world, in patterns of meaning and intensities of desire. The discovery of these harmonics is what Milbank terms the theurgic and what Williams articulates in terms of ‘how the material world carries or embodies meaning, how matter and meaning do not necessarily belong in different universes.’\textsuperscript{39} For Williams and Milbank the body finds its way in a world that encodes meaning and is known first as gift, as already relatable and meaningful before it is usable. In their understanding of the self as embodied soul or ensouled body, the self is to be affirmed in its vulnerability, its mobility through time and in relationship. Culture is itself formed through this fragile mobility where the body comes to be ‘a place where meaning is made and a world is organized.’ More than this, the self becomes the ‘place where infinite creative attention is focused, holding all of this bodily ensemble in its gaze.’\textsuperscript{40} It is here that the twin themes of limit and gift (themselves echoes of kenosis and ascent) come into sharpest focus. The body is a locus of meaning, but these meanings are mobile, fragile and open to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. But if meaning is to be risked, it can only be risked in the trust that it is held in all its limit and vulnerability by the infinite creative attention of the divine. Both theologians see the life of the self, the life of the soul, as the negotiation of the materiality of the body and its world, and it is these negotiations that are what we call culture. This becomes the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Milbank, "The Soul of Reciprocity Part One," 338.
\item Williams, "On Being a Human Body," 407.
\item The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), x.
\item "On Being a Human Body," 409.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
next significant theme upon which this thesis turns. Culture therefore becomes the next theme to be explored in this introduction.

Culture

Williams sees culture as ‘a mode of making sense of the world, by material and intellectual labour’ and therefore as ‘inherently changeable,’ and Milbank likewise emphasises the movements of production and exchange in its formation. I will develop this understanding of culture throughout this thesis, but at this point it is useful to articulate a starting point from which to work from. For this I will use Gorringe’s *Furthering Humanity: A Theology of Culture*. Gorringe defines culture as ‘the record of what we do as ensouled bodies, or bodily souls, from cuisine to Quartets, from poetry to pottery.’

There are three important aspects to the relationship of Christianity to culture. First is the significance of incarnation, seen as ‘the mutual moulding of nature and spirit,’ where Word – as story, reason or doctrine – is made flesh, not simply as an accident or episode but as the way the human and divine encounter each other, through ‘food, the world of symbols, the way in which we cherish bodies.’ The second aspect is the ‘eschatological proviso’ that means no culture can finally embody a fullness of meaning. This will be seen in chapter 1 as Williams articulates the radical skepticism of the Christian self to all systems of power and identity and also in the refusal of secularism championed by Milbank. The third aspect is that culture is not static but is rather ‘the process of becoming.’ As the interplay of self and culture is explored over the following chapters, these three aspects will come into focus.

Gorringe also analyses culture in terms of its contemporary expressions. Here we experience the ‘continuing fall out of modernity.’ Even as
modernism constructed models of depth: the dialectic of essence and appearance: the Freudian model of latent and repressed; the existential model of authentic and inauthentic. What replaces these is the conception of practices, discourses and textual play. In this world ethics becomes aesthetics. Key words are euphoria, play, jouissance ... for the end of all these struggles is the free play of the market and the pleasure of commodity.48

Gorringe sees three necessary challenges to this contemporary expression of culture: first in this situation of ‘new depthlessness’ new practices of reflection become necessary, to really think through what we are doing to ourselves and our world.49 Second ‘Word and flesh’ have to be held together as movements for justice and peace recognise a need for ‘the restructuring of the global economy’ and ‘a refusal to accept capitalism as the narrative of the world.’50 And third, in a current culture of amnesia there is the need to tell and re-tell the story, both through history and liturgy. This telling and re-telling make up the first three chapters of this thesis. In his conclusion Gorringe refers to Newman’s wonderful – if romantic – account of the first Benedictine monastic communities in which they find their world in physical and social ruins. ‘What the haughty Alaric or the fierce Attila had broken to pieces, these patient meditative men had brought together and made to live again.’51 This sense of the weaving together of the broken threads of the self and its cultural world also runs throughout Milbank’s and Williams’ writing. It can be seen in Milbank’s hopeful excavations of ruined Gothic Space,52 and is why Williams can affirm that ‘Christ’s birth takes place in the context of a landscape of loss, destruction, haunted and half-forgotten stones.’53 In the rebuilding of culture, we desperately need to look to the bombed-out ruins of Aleppo, the fragmenting cords of a less than United Kingdom, the industrial excavations of sacred Indigenous Lands. For if culture is the telling of a story, then ‘telling the story of catastrophe creates a world, and in a certain sense enables action in a world, action that is a critique of fatalism and an affirmation of value.’54

48 Ibid., 259-60.
49 For the necessity and impossibility of thought for the contemporary self, see Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
50 Gorringe, Furthering Humanity, 263.
51 Quoted in ibid., 262.
52 See chapter 3 of this thesis and Milbank, The Word Made Strange, 268-92.
Why John Milbank and Rowan Williams?

At this point it is important to explain the reasons behind the selection of these two specific theologians. First both Williams and Milbank prioritise the confrontation with God in terms of the formation of the self, the life of the Church and the life of the world. For Milbank this is a God ‘first prayed to, first imagined, first inspiring certain actions, first put into words; and for Williams, God is the stranger in our midst, ‘a ray of darkness … in the lives of individuals and in the story of humanity as a whole – the ground of paradox, of the oblique and puzzled language of so much Christian doctrine. This means that their theology is confidently a theology of the public square and also a theology of the church, even as the boundaries between the two are utterly porous. Whatever self emerges from this confrontation it could never be a private or solipsistic self, but is a self radically implicated in questions of public justice and liturgical virtue.

Secondly both theologians look towards a retrieval of the past in terms of a renewed askesis of the present. Theirs is a theology that seeks to ‘make strange’ our present conceptions of ourselves and our world through a new hearing of the tradition, a tradition that is never simply conservative, but that opens-up contemporary sites of meaning in radically new ways. For both, ‘Christian history is part of modernity’s buried and frequently denied biography, so the bringing to speech of its forgotten traditions works to both subvert and re-imagine contemporary constructions of the self. As Milbank writes, the theologian’s task is of ‘redeeming estrangement’ by reworking the incarnation ‘not to confirm it as it was, but to show it again as it surprisingly is.”

Thirdly, coupled with this...
retrieval of the past is a creative engagement with contemporary narrations of particularity, language, culture and embodiment, understanding that such engagements will require the rethinking of the tradition. Both theologians have an unswervingly eschatological vision where the truth of the self is before us not behind us, and where new perspectives and speech are needed for the full articulation of such truth.

The fourth reason pertains to Williams’ articulation of the ‘awesome fragility’ of the human self. Williams’ shows a depth and sensitivity of engagement here that Milbank cannot match. Any contemporary theological engagement with the self that wants to take seriously its vulnerability to language, desire, temporality and history simply cannot ignore Williams’ theology. The fifth reason is Milbank’s relentless exposure of the secular and his corresponding charting of an alternative modernity. Despite some arguments that Milbank’s theology is nostalgic in seeking a return to some kind of Christendom,⁶⁰ there is, I feel, a courageous imagination at work that is looking towards a future for the self that takes us beyond environmental and political collapse and where real redemption is possible. Williams’ sensitivity to the fragility of the self coupled with Milbank’s imaginative charting of future possibilities is the space in which this thesis comes to be written.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 offers a critical engagement with contemporary narratives of the self. Williams argues that such narratives are only half-remembered stories of the Christian self, both restless and questioning. Now dislodged from any sense of relation to the divine, the self is left to a world of endless fragmentation and suspicion. Milbank comes into play with his genealogical exposure and deconstruction of the secular self, a secularity in which difference can only be imagined in a context of violence. Even as Williams and Milbank affirm the mobility of the self – its constructions and movements through language, difference and culture – they look towards the retrieval of the language of the soul. Can

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⁶⁰ For a lively discussion of Milbank’s project in general see *New Blackfriars* vol. 73, no. 861 (1992). See also Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 81-118.
conflict and rivalry be transcended by divine loving attention, and is the self more than an arbitrary and fleeting assertion of will?

Chapter 2 asks whether such a renewal of the language of the soul is possible. With Williams and Milbank I will work to effect a retrieval of patristic articulations of the self that are not merely of archaeological significance but rather enable an imaginative reconstruction of the present. Gregory of Nyssa posits a sense of infinite mobility to the self, as it journeys upward and outward in ever expansive desire through ecclesial and virtuous engagement. Augustine fully articulates the exilic wanderings of the self in a world of risk and suspicion and yet recasts time and history as gift and enables a new sociality to emerge as difference is thought beyond violence. And Pseudo-Dionysius enables the self to shape its world through theurgic action, no longer to dominate but rather to create, redeem and re-enchant. As I begin to shape my own construction of the self, themes of embodiment, particularity, language and culture are already beginning to emerge. Could it be that it is the very constructed nature of the self that which paradoxically enables its giftedness to be discerned?

Chapter 3 extends this emphasis on the mobility of the self, this time giving full articulation to its cultural shaping in terms of language, history and relationality. With Hegel, Williams imagines the mobility of the self in terms of kenosis, a movement of loss and estrangement as identity is risked in a world of endless negotiation and mis-recognition. Milbank takes a different trajectory enabled by his reading of Vico as the self is understood in terms of its poetic shaping of its world. I will argue that these contrasting visions of kenosis and poetic ascent need to be held in tension as the self begins to be articulated in terms of cultural embodiment, as both limit and gift.

Chapter 4 changes key as Williams’ and Milbank’s ecclesiologies are now considered in terms of the Church as an arena of the soul. Williams calls the Church back to a confrontation with the central mystery of the cross in which kenosis is finally glimpsed as the dynamics of the life of God, and Milbank articulates the Church as gift, an endless reciprocity that refracts the eternal generativity of the Trinity. Once more I will argue that the kenotic and the theurgic are to be woven together as the Church enacts the life of the soul through gift, sacrament and sign. Can a vision of plenitude and loss sustain the life of the soul?
Chapter 5 weaves these disparate threads together in a constructive vision of the self that coalesces around the themes of cultural making and Trinitarian life. Once more Williams’ emphasis is on kenosis as the self is caught up in the costly displacements of divine love, and Milbank focusses on ascent as the self becomes the dynamic repetition-in-difference of the creative excess of the divine. I will argue that these are not simply contrary visions, but that together they can become a dramatic re-articulation of an ancient understanding of the self, now imagined in terms of particularity, language and culture. How are the cultural shapings of the self – its language, embodiment and history – to be seen as its divine image?

In the conclusion I will show how such a vision of the self – now articulated in terms of kenosis and ascent – gives an account of the self in terms of language, temporality and limit, and so in terms of culture, but how this cultural understanding is not finally cut off from its life and telos in God. Rather, ‘when we contingently but authentically make things and reshape ourselves through time, we are not estranged from the eternal, but enter further into its recesses by what for us is the only possible route.’

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61 Milbank, Being Reconciled, ix.
Lost Souls? Contemporary Narratives of the Self

Immanuel Kant wrote that "Enlightenment is man's exit from his self-incurred minority,"\(^1\) and it is this narrative that is popularly regarded as truth today. Here we have a 'subtraction theory'\(^2\) where humanity shorn of religion and superstition and no longer dependent upon questionable traditions and authorities is free to become the man of reason, to face the world as it truly is and to imagine the self as it truly is. But this narrative is itself a construct, a reading, a *mythos* that seeks to understand the self and its world in a certain way. In this chapter I will explore alternative narratives of the contemporary self as articulated by Rowan Williams and John Milbank. I will begin with Williams' sketching of the modern enlightenment subject where the restless Christian self has been submerged and half-forgotten – dislodged from its relationship to the divine other it is now lost in a context of endless suspicion and fragmentation. With Milbank I will then attempt a radical genealogical exposure of the secular self, culminating in an exploration of late modern expressions of the self around the decisive issues of difference and violence, as the self is conceived as inherently mobile and yet inescapably conflictual. Neither Williams nor Milbank believe that the mobility and constructed nature of the self are simply to be rejected, but if suspicion is not to be endless, then difference is to be conceived beyond violence also. In the final section I will explore alongside Williams and Milbank the possibilities for the retrieval of the language of the soul, not as some immortal and unchanging part of ourselves, but paradoxically as that which is culturally shaped, yet

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finally configured as gift. If it is the frantic and fragmented will-to-power of the late modern self that invites the equation that difference equals conflict, can the self’s ‘restless homelessness’ and ‘cultural shaping’ be transposed into a different key that allows for a more promising narrative to be written?

Williams’ Narrative of the Modern Self

In *Faith in the Public Square* Williams writes of the need to tell an alternative story of modernity that questions its claims to timeless rationality. He sees the main task as the creation of spaces that enable ‘an alternative story – to challenge the self-evidence of the narrative of secular modernity.’\(^3\) Williams begins by pointing to the supposed triumphs of western modernity: (i) an understanding of human rights where people are able to claim the resources they need to make them happy and to enable them to be in control of their lives;\(^4\) (ii) a certain understanding of freedom, seen in terms of availability of choice between alternatives as an unqualified good; (iii) democracy; (iv) the distinction between public and private; and (v) the character of European art and literature where ‘what is uniquely human is a capacity for “self-creation.”’\(^5\) In each the essence of the human task is seen as *self-definition*, and the emphasis is on the creation of a secular space that enables maximum freedom for individual expression and assertion.

Whereas in traditional pre-modern societies, the human found its place within a ‘sacred order’ – such as the *Tao* of Chinese thought, or the *Logos* of the philosophers – this new project of self-creation challenges the priority of ‘an eternal creating purpose’ and accounts for much of European modernity’s hostility to the religious. Such a vision was wedded to that of the progress of reason, ‘the unstoppable advance of the demystifying of the world and the removal of authorities that work without any rational accountability.’\(^6\) Williams sees two problems emerging here: the first is that such a progressive and universal view remains only ‘the preferred world view of a prosperous minority of the hu-

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5 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 64.
6 Ibid., 65.
man race,” and second, that this view was most often exported abroad either as conquest or colonialism. Williams sets up a number of dichotomies that question the ‘universal rationalism’ that is asserted at the heart of this vision: first slavery and racism begin to be defended on philosophical grounds even as the ‘universal rights of man’ begin to be celebrated; second ‘transnational business’ begins to see the world and its environment as ‘a virtually limitless warehouse for development’; and third, a violent tension arises between individual self-creation and the unfettered competition of the global market. It seems that ‘European universalism ended up producing a world in which immense inequality was created, and in which the degree of that inequality seems to become yearly if not daily more marked.’ How is the self to find a home in such a world as this?

In Lost Icons, a book of conversations around culture and loss, Williams explores this problematic of the self and its world. Here he builds an argument about the closing down of human possibilities in both language and culture through engagements with childhood, community and remorse. This leads the way for a devastating analysis of what Williams refers to as our ‘lost soul.’ Using a deliberately loaded term, ‘soul,’ Williams nevertheless defines it in a surprising manner:

what is under discussion is not the ‘soul’ of early modern philosophy, an immaterial individual substance, but something more complex – a whole way of speaking, of presenting and ‘uttering’ the self, that presupposes relation as the ground that gives the self room to exist, a relation developing in time, a relation with an agency which addresses or summons the self, but is in itself no part of the system of interacting and negotiating speakers in the world ... The self is, not because of need but because of gift.

At this point it is important to stress this dual nature of the soul. This is not some caricature of an ancient timeless self or some abstract Cartesian ego that Williams is attempting to resuscitate, but something more akin to the speech between people, a self always already in relationship. But more than this, Williams’ argument is ‘that we need an Other beyond all specific, contingent others if our relations with those specific, contingent others are ever really to be possible.’ This self is embedded in the histories and

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 66-67.
9 See especially the final chapter of Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2000).
10 Ibid., 160.
stories of others, and so always radically implicated in them, but also given utterly gratuitously. It is this double reality of the self that Williams believes contemporary society is losing sight of.

Williams narrates this loss in a variety of ways, but here it is located in terms of three movements in Western history. The first is what he terms ‘the almost infinite corruptibility of religious discourse.’\(^{12}\) From the outset the religious tradition itself is implicated in the loss of the human soul. The church and its traditions are not free from the problems of language, the ambiguity of desire and the bid for power, even as they claim to speak on behalf of the divine. This corruption leads to the second movement, that of Enlightenment critique, which coalesces around ‘the sense of having your identity and capacity prescribed by a this-worldly other that claimed other-worldly sanction,’ exposing the very ‘arbitrariness of the mediators of the sacred.’\(^{13}\) Hence Kant’s famous dictum that being enlightened is about growing up – taking the risk of independent thinking that is free of any presumed authority. It seems that the religious tradition only succeeded in speaking in divine imperatives about their own need for power and control.

But as ‘the Enlightenment itself collapses under the weight of its own aspirations,’ the second movement gives way to a third. Here the Enlightenment’s own critique of ideology is levelled against itself as constructions of a ‘normative, rational subject’ are exposed by ‘its own investment in certain sorts of power and enslavement.’\(^{14}\) Williams sees this third movement as circling around three moments of hermeneutical suspicion: that of Marx (that every interest is driven by economic concern); Freud (that motivations are shaped by unconscious drives); and feminism (where the rational and universally human is exposed as a patriarchal construction of certain ideals of masculinity). Williams sums up this narrative of suspicion and fragmentation:

the Enlightenment objected to traditional authorities on the grounds that they were the products of contingent history ... But if the law and rationality proposed by the Enlightenment ... are themselves exposed as contingent, products of particular perspectives and interests, what remains?\(^{15}\)

\(^{12}\) Williams, Lost Icons, 162.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 163.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 164.
\(^{15}\) Ibid., 165.
Only three inadequate understandings of the self. First, a Romantic self authenticated by its own feelings (which are beyond the scrutiny and critique of others); second, a post-Enlightenment bearer of inalienable rights (only to be asserted in a contest of power); and third, a postmodern site upon which arbitrary transactions of power are played out. For Williams, ‘all this is tantamount to a forgetfulness of culture itself.’

In *Why Study the Past*, Williams adds another layer to this already complicated framework. Having charted church history as a disruptive ‘making strange’ of our histories and ourselves, and then feeling his way through its breakages and exiles so that they point to the activity and promise of God within it – first as a community of ‘resident aliens,’ and then in the fractures of Reformation and Counter-Reformation thought – he finally alights on the Spanish Carmelites and posits an understanding of the self in their writings that should seem strangely familiar. The Carmelites, according to Williams,

> depict a human self that is homeless in the world, trained to be suspicious of any sense of gratification and completion, trained to scrutinise both feeling and thought, to be for itself a problem, an object to be examined sceptically.

Such a self, he adds, can only be grounded in the wholly other but wholly gratuitous divine love, but what happens when that divine love is removed from the picture? ‘If that alien love is removed ... what is left is the characteristically modern self, desiring, dissatisfied, homeless.’ The relentless shaking-up and stripping-away that just is church tradition has led us precisely here. Williams is taking us to a risky place.

Already we can begin to see that Williams’ story of the emergence of the modern self provocatively circles around an unsettled and unsettling account of the homelessness of the Christian self. Returning to an essay in *Faith in the Public Square*, Williams here retells this story focussing on the Christian understanding of conversion. Once again Williams stresses the questioning and subversive trajectory of Christian thought and practice. In its earliest confrontations with the Roman Empire, it was felt, argues Williams, that

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16 Ibid., 166.
17 *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 111.
19 *Why Study the Past?*, 71.
20 Ibid.
‘Christians were automatically out to subvert the entire fabric of social morality.’\(^{21}\) The early Christian experience of martyrdom ‘claimed that there was a hidden reality, deeper and more lasting than the culture that currently prevailed.’ There was a strong sense of being open to judgement – a questioning of society, but also a questioning of one’s self – and this openness to judgement was centred on the cross, that strange double sign of human failure and divine victory. Augustine deepened this sense of homelessness,\(^{22}\) and he and others sowed ‘the seeds of deep cultural unease, an *irony* and a scepticism about existing situations and systems in the light of God’s action in the cross of Jesus.’\(^{23}\) In the Reformation this unease exploded into all-out protest against the institution of the church, and finally coalesced into a deep-seated suspicion of the divine, leaving ‘the human spirit homeless in a far more radical and threatening sense.’ From now on, ‘*nothing* is secure, anywhere.’\(^{24}\)

In his plotting of the modern subject Williams discerns a new emphasis on self-creation and self-definition that sets the self against transcendence as the religious is questioned and finally subverted by the self’s belief in its own immanent autonomy. Despite the modern investment in reason and universalism, the narrative of modernity has culminated in fragmentation and inequality where enlightenment principles have been twisted into an instrument of power and control. In contemporary iterations of the self the eschatological orientation of the Christian self that had enabled a radical questioning and relativising of current social constructions of identity and culture has been eclipsed by an immanent frame, and so suspicion and endless fragmentation has been prioritised and absolutised. The question remains: is this closing down of human possibilities in language and culture the only narration of the self left to us, or is there the hope of a re-articulation of the soul? Before I attempt to address that question, I first want to turn to Milbank’s story of modernity: the genealogical exposure of the secular self.

\(^{21}\) *Faith in the Public Square*, 66.
\(^{22}\) I will be exploring this sense of Augustinian homelessness in more detail in the next chapter.
\(^{23}\) Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 67.
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 68.
Milbank’s Genealogy of the Secular Self

With the words ‘once there was no “secular,”’ Milbank begins his genealogical attack on ‘subtraction theories’ of secularism.\(^{25}\) The secular is not the realm of the purely human, the neutral sphere that remains once the sacred has retreated from the scene, it is rather a domain that ‘had to be instituted or imagined.’\(^{26}\) Milbank’s is a decisive rejection of the liberal view that secularism is the end point of history’s progression in the West and that the idea of autonomous freedom is the natural and rational result of the Judeo-Christian tradition’s own impulse. Instead Milbank sees the secular as an imaginative construction and a theological construction at that. Milbank’s project therefore begins as a genealogical exposure of these assumptions that challenges the underlying ‘ontology of violence’ they are predicated on. He discerns three theological strands which combine to enable the space of the modern secular to appear: (i) late-medieval nominalism; (ii) the Protestant reformation; and (iii) seventeenth century Augustinianism. These three theological currents ‘completely privatized, spiritualized and transcendentalized the sacred, and concurrently reimagined nature, human action and society as a sphere of autonomous, sheerly formal power.’\(^{27}\) Within this secularising movement there is a particular unhinging of the world as the medieval understanding of analogy and participation begins to break down. ‘No longer is the world participatorily enfolded within the divine expressive logos, but instead a bare divine unity starkly confronts the other distinct unities which he has ordained.’\(^{28}\) This movement also begins to break apart ontology from theology, where being comes to be known without reference to its transcendent cause. Relationality also begins to give way to assertive will, and ‘cosmos’ (a world alive with sacramental meanings intuited by faith) dissolves into ‘universe’ (a cold vacuum that can only be observed and measured).

What might be termed a nominalist and voluntarist slide has, in Milbank’s view, four disastrous results. (i) It questions the qualitative difference between finite and infinite being – now God ‘exists’ in the same way as everything else ‘exists’ and this flattens out

\(^{26}\) Ibid.
\(^{27}\) Ibid.
\(^{28}\) Ibid., 14.
the realm of the transcendent, but also generates an unbridgeable gulf between God and things. Instead of a suspension of the material where every material thing is defined in its relation to its transcendent source and goal, now everything is spatially distanced on the same plane of significance. (ii) This levelling of the transcendent now meant that things could be understood purely in relation to this world, no longer through participation or teleologically. (iii) This meant that the question of Being could now be posed independently of God and that metaphysics from now onwards shifts its attention to this foundational question. It is here that Milbank differs from Heidegger’s genealogical account of western metaphysics. Whereas Heidegger29 accuses the whole of western philosophy since Plato of this onto-theological move (where God is imagined as the greatest being there is), Milbank locates this mistake much further on in the history of the west. (iv) This means that revelation is now disconnected from a proper understanding of being. No longer are revelation and reason to be understood together as complementary intensities of God’s illuminating activity (as it was in Augustine and Aquinas), but now revelation only adds content to a reason that is already able to understand, categorise and manipulate its world autonomously. All of this leads to what Milbank calls ‘a formalism about power and rights.’30

Milbank’s genealogical interrogation of the secular exposes its two sources, the one pagan and the other heretical. The first is what Milbank terms ‘the Machiavellian moment,’ a reversion to an understanding of pagan virtue, a virtue of ‘heroic manliness’ which is to be ‘cultivated supremely in war.’31 The second is a Hobbsian construction of society based on the coercive force of God’s irresistible power, a violence restrained by laws that can be read-off the natural world rationally, but have at their base only an arcane and unpredictable divine will. In both cases – and Machiavelli and Hobbes remain archetypal to the modern project for Milbank – reality is construed as a battle ground of wills. Whereas dominium had traditionally meant a mastery over one’s own passions, yet, argues Milbank,

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30 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 14.
31 Ibid., 22.
at the margins of this classical and medieval theme there persists the trace of a more brutal and original *dominium*, the unrestricted lordship over what lies within one’s power – oneself, one’s children, land or slaves – in Roman private law.32

And from the early modern period, Milbank argues, this understanding moves from the margins to the centre. No longer is *dominium* linked to the just ordering of society, but rather becomes about the exercise of individual sovereign power (or the state imagined as an individual sovereign will), where gift has been violently reconceived as utility. Hobbes’ Leviathan, for example, becoming a symbol for the repressive artificial body of the state.

Because it is rooted in an individualistic account of the will, oblivious to questions of its providential purpose in the hands of God, it has difficulty in understanding any ‘collective making,’ or genuinely social process. To keep notions of the state free from any suggestions of a collective essence or generally recognized *telos*, it must be constructed on the individualist model of *dominium*.33

The technical term *factum* becomes of central concern here. Whereas for much of modernity *factum* denotes the artificial realm of human making (in culture, economics or stage-craft) that is cut-off from divine direction and participation (a pure field of human power), Milbank works to recover a sense of this ‘human-making’ as analogous to the creative purpose of God and as participating in its activity.34 This difference – between *techne* and *poiesis* – is of fundamental significance. Society is here seen as a human product, linked with the accompanying understanding that the human self is also the product of society. *Factum* denotes both self and society in their mutual *constructedness*. The decisive difference is that Milbank will follow a participatory trajectory where human ‘making’ is analogous to God’s creative work, whereas a more secular vision instrumentalises the artificial and therefore reduces the *poetic* to the merely *technological*. Milbank agrees with Williams when he suggests that for modernity ‘what is most uniquely human is a capacity for “self-creation,”’ and that this ‘project of “self-creation” challenges the priority of an eternal creating purpose’ and is therefore ‘hostile to any religious sense of the world and of human destiny.’35 But, with Williams, he also want to push consider-

32 Ibid., 12.
33 Ibid., 13.
34 I will be exploring what is a Vichian theme in Chapter 3.
35 Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 64.
ation of the ‘cultural making’ of the self and its world into another context entirely, where such creativity can be linked to the ‘hand of a creator’ where human making aligns ‘with a mysterious and indestructible loving purpose.”

Milbank sees *dominium* at the root of both ‘modern absolutism’ and ‘modern liberalism’ where this same notion – a power that is ‘unlimited and absolutely alone’ – promotes both the sovereign power of the state and the ‘wills of many private persons.’ It seems that the state is the atomised contracting individual writ large. The question is posed, ‘how did this anthropology ever secure legitimacy in a theological and metaphysical era?’ Milbank’s answer exposes the ‘theological’ foundations of the secular: ‘Dominium, as power, could only become the human essence, because it was seen as reflecting the divine essence.” If we are made in the image of God and God is imagined as absolute will, utterly sovereign and utterly alone, then this too will be our legacy. According to Milbank it was in the later Middle Ages that the antique connection between ‘monotheism and monarchic unity’ was aggressively re-imagined in which political power was once more ‘grounded in the unity and self-identity of the rational subject.”

Theology thus determines ‘the new anthropology’ in two significant ways. First in re-conceiving the *imago dei* in terms of an unrestricted enjoyment of property rights and as the expression of an isolated ‘monarchic’ will. And second, by abandoning any notion of analogical participation in being and substituting the idea of a ‘covenantal bond,’ thereby providing a merely contractual model for human relationships. If sociality is seen as an artificial creation of the human subject, then a focus on *dominium* has made it ‘a matter of absolute sovereignty and absolute ownership.’ And now such *dominium* applies to the cosmos, society and our very selves. ‘*This* is the space in which there can be a “secular,” or secular knowledge of the secular – and it is just as fictional as all other human topographies.”

36 Ibid., 74.
37 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 14.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 15.
Milbank argues that these secular constructions all too quickly mutate into their ‘postmodern’ guises. Such ‘postmodernism’ combines two aspects: an historicist ‘genealogy,’ and an ‘ontology of difference.’ Milbank asserts that

the postmodern realization that discourses of truth are so many incommensurable language games does not ineluctably impose upon us the conclusion that the ultimate, over-arching game is the play of force, fate and chance.

Indeed, in postmodernism Milbank detects a resurgence of paganism, those elements of sacred violence ‘which Christianity both exposed and refused.’ For Milbank, Nietzsche becomes the only honest articulation of the secular. This is because the Kantian move of locating the ethical in ‘the fact of the will and of human freedom’ dissolves all to quickly into the understanding that freedom itself is only discerned in ‘complex strategies of power’ between unequal individuals, what Milbank terms ‘the Nietzschean reduction of liberty to power.’ And here Milbank works to expose nihilism as ‘no more than a mythos’ but that to counter it the liberal subject cannot be resuscitated but rather one must put forth ‘an alternative mythos, equally unfounded, but nonetheless embodying an “ontology of peace,” which conceives differences as analogically related, rather than equivocally at variance.’ Even though this ‘nihilistic genealogy’ requires ‘an ontology of violence’ – or perhaps precisely because this is the case – Milbank sees it as the clearest articulation of the secular in which conflict is fundamental.

It is here that Milbank conceives of Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals as a kind of City of God written back to front. For Nietzsche, as for Augustine, the pagan virtues were from the beginning a celebration of violence. But Nietzsche re-writes Augustine in that he sees this virtue as primal, and Christianity as working to weaken its resolve, the slave revolt against the vibrant and the powerful, the slow ebb of the Dionysian ideal embodied in the ancient will-to-power. Nietzsche refuses to tell the story of a ‘constant human subject,’ but instead discerns ‘many different fictions of subjectivity in the course of human history,’ and so here his genealogical method becomes an attempt to expose claims

40 Ibid., 278.
41 Ibid., 279.
42 Ibid., 280.
43 Ibid., 279.
44 Ibid. I will explore this counter ontology in the next chapter in the section on Augustine and the Social Self.
to eternal and universal principle as merely historically formed and ideologically driven assertions of power. It is of course against Christianity that he marshals his most polemical attacks.

In Christianity neither morality nor religion come into contact with reality at any point. Nothing but imaginary causes ... nothing but imaginary effects ... A traffic between imaginary beings ... an imaginary natural science ... an imaginary psychology ... This purely fictitious world ... falsifies and disvalues and denies actuality.\(^45\)

Nietzsche ascribes no universals to human society apart from one 'that it is always a field of warfare.' But Nietzsche dos not simply narrate this story, he celebrates it, seeking to recover in his day the Dionysian vigour of the ancient world, typified as it is in ancient Greece. It is clear, suggests Milbank, that the 'universal warfare' that Nietzsche celebrates, is no 'utilitarian necessity ... to grow stronger and survive,' but rather a 'concomitant of the pure creative will to difference, to self-assertion.'\(^46\)

Milbank’s exposure of the secular self involves a double focus: first on *factum*, the acknowledgement that the self constructs and is constructed by culture, that there is no timeless essence of the self to be uncovered, but only a *mythos*, or an imaginative narrative to be told. The problem with secular narrations of the self, as Milbank sees them, is in their focus on *dominium* as the context in which the self emerges. Once more, like Williams, there is an acknowledgement of the Christian imagination that continues to fund modernity’s narrative of the self, and once more it is acknowledged that this articulation has been twisted and uprooted from a context of relationality and transcendence.

Modernity’s focus on a self that rises above its world in order to dominate and subdue it is for Milbank a perverse transformation of a certain ‘image of God’ theology. Where God was once imagined as a pure arbitrary will set over-against the world, now the human subject has been made in that same image and the self is reduced to a mere abstraction: the abstraction of the assertive and conflictual will. A second strand to this secular articulation is its focus on difference – on language, sociality and cultural-making – but once more this difference can only be imagined as conflict, locating the self in a world

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\(^{46}\) Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 282.
of violent assertion and rivalrous competition. The question remains: is the closing in of an antagonistic immanence all that is left for the self, or can a new narrative be written?

Retrieving the Language of the Soul

Even as the narratives of modernity suggest a kind of ‘end of history’ – either in the endless play of fictive identities or the triumph of the global market where identity can only be bought or sold – both Williams and Milbank believe that a theological retrieval of the self is still possible. Neither look backwards to a simple return to pre-modern conceptions of the self, questioning whether this would be possible or even desirable, but rather both argue that a ‘postmodern’ stress on mobility, contingency, temporality and language is to be given its fullest articulation. Finally however, only an authentically theological conception of the self can finally enfold its fragmented desires, endless suspicions, and its endless articulations of difference into an infinite relationality. Only here can a true vision of the self emerge.

For Williams any retrieval of the soul must reckon with the themes of time, recognition and the other. Contemporary selves feel their identities can be easily purchased and discarded, easily dissolved and reformed, a choice easily made. But this incapacity to see people as produced, formed in their biology and psychology by the passage of time, implies a fixity in our perceptions of each other which is potentially very troubling. A world of timeless consuming egos, adopting and discarding styles of self-presentation and self-assertion, is a social as well as a philosophical shambles.47

Such selves are formed in a context of competition where mutual recognition is overshadowed or ignored. Williams speaks of the mythos of the modern self, a ‘robust, primitive, individual self, seeking its fortune in a hostile world and fighting off its competitors,’ a myth that leaves only an ‘atomistic system of desires confronting other such systems.’48 What is missing here is ‘the felt recognition of a common humanity granted and welcomed.’49 Such selves are cut-off from the ‘vision, involvement and investment of others,’ turned inward as the measure of its own dignity and worth and radically turned

47 Williams, Lost Icons, 49.
48 Ibid., 94.
49 Ibid., 93.
away from the other. Where there is ‘a doctrine of the will’s power and resourcefulness in constructing and maintaining identities,’ suggests Williams, there can be no real acknowledgement of the other, for if the other exists at all it is only to serve the purposes of the individual self. But in reality the selves that we are never belong exclusively to us. Williams sees the need to break through these illusions of autonomy and isolation if we are to retrieve a sense of the soul. To do this the self is no longer to be defined by present self-descriptions but needs to be understood in terms of its past, a past that is in no way its possession, or even its to control, but rather ‘the history of choices made, the inevitable history of loss that makes us actual and not abstract subjects.’

Language is also of fundamental significance, not as assertion, representation or the play of signification, but rather a truthful speech within a community of other speakers. Williams is suggesting that a retrieval or re-imagining of the soul has something to do with *taking time*, the telling and re-telling of the story of the self, not as *ex nihilo* as if the self is to be conjured by some timeless, autonomous will, but a story where each telling makes possible what comes next, a story in which both self and others are mutually implicated.

Williams puts forward two moments that speak profoundly of the life of the soul. First as the self confronts moments of conflict or frustration, and second through the experience of falling in love. So first, what does the experience of frustrated desire tell us about soul-making? Here the self that emerges is ‘not at one with itself but is moving and changing … always “in question,” under criticism, a matter of thought.’ The work of the soul is to be done in the recognition of the gap between desire and reality, the hard work of becoming reconciled ‘to the reality of change and so of frustration.’ Such soul-making is rendered impossible if we are constantly trying to ‘imagine an environment without friction’ or by living in a culture that is obsessed with ‘escaping or resolving.’ Soul-making happens ‘in the state of profound self-questioning,’ in the refusal ‘to cover over, evade or explain the pain and shock of whatever brings the self into question.’ It is a recognition of a radical vulnerability, a radical incompletion where ‘my

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50 Ibid., 137.
51 Ibid., 145.
52 Ibid., 146.
53 Ibid., 147-48.
54 Ibid., 149.
“health” is in the thinking or sensing of how I am not at one with myself, existing as I do in time (change) and language (exchange).55

And what of the experience of being in love? Williams is not simply talking about desire or obsession here, but rather the mutual conviction shared by two people 'that each is accepted, given time and room, treated not as an object of desire alone but as a focus for attention and fascination.'56 Here soul-making is once more about recognition, the time taken to discover the other, alongside the time given to be discovered oneself. Williams argues that there is a strange sense both of the intensification of the self and its self-forgetting as love 'hovers between egotism and self-denial.'57 And once more this is an occasion for risk.

The knife-edge is between freedom to tell – which allows an other time to listen and absorb, and accepts that who or what I am here will only emerge in this indefinite time of speaking and listening – and compulsion to tell – I must now find the words to deliver myself totally to the other, because if I fail in this I cannot be assured of their love.58

And it is here that we are close to the heart of Williams’ understanding of the soul, 'that vision of the self as not there to be possessed, to be completed or to serve another's completion; the vision of a self that is gratuitous or contingent in respect of any other’s need, anyone else's agenda, and that therefore demands time, words and patience.'59 In the end for Williams the historical world in all its negotiations and assertions between ‘personal agents with specific interests’ can only challenge fictions of ‘timeless interiority and independence,’ but cannot deliver the freedom of security the self needs 'to decisively break through anxiety, rivalry and exploitation.'60 This is why modern, and especially late modern stories of the self can only ever be half the story, leaving the self teetering on the edge of nihilistic dread. In order to find its soul, the self must attend to the 'God who can’t be negotiated with, and who has no interest to defend and whose creative activity

55 Ibid., 151.
56 Ibid., 155.
57 Ibid., 156.
58 Ibid., 158-59.
59 Ibid., 160.
60 Ibid., 161.
is therefore pure gratuity,\textsuperscript{61} in the recognition that 'we are recongizable to each other because we are first recognized (affirmed, valued, loved) by God.'\textsuperscript{62}

What is this Other that Williams sees as so decisive here? With Gray I would like to suggest that this Other is both 'maximally different from any thing or agent' so that God is not to be articulated as agent, cause or object in the world, but also that this Other is to be articulated 'in a grammar in which God is paradoxically maximally and generatively present to all things or agents as their very possibility to be what they are.'\textsuperscript{63} Elsewhere in his writings Williams deploys a more precise term taken from the fifteenth century Nicholas of Cusa: \textit{non aliud}.\textsuperscript{64} This term is used in a variety of settings by Williams and is deployed when the otherness of God is to be articulated in the double sense above.\textsuperscript{65} \textit{Non aliud} means both that God is not an-other, where 'the otherness between God and the world is inexhaustible and irreducible,'\textsuperscript{66} but also that God is not other, so is utterly present to all things as they are given their being and meaning in him. Difference here sustains both distance and proximity and its seems clear that this principle for Williams – as indeed for Cusa – is a contemporary re-working of the Neoplatonic theme of transcendence,\textsuperscript{67} now recast with a new emphasis on language, particularity and identity.

If Williams sees the loss of the language of the soul in terms of a failure of memory and language, the loss of culture which purely programmatic secularism enacts, and the sundering of the self from its deepest connection with the divine other, then for Milbank this loss is seen in the turn towards the subject, a concurrent refusal of reciprocity and transcendence in an embrace of the inward and the technical within the plane of imma-

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 162.
\textsuperscript{62} Faith in the Public Square, 123.
\textsuperscript{63} Brett Gray, Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 5.
\textsuperscript{64} For an excellent contemporary engagement with Cusa see Johannes Hoff, The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa, Interventions (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).
\textsuperscript{65} See, for example, Rowan Williams, "Logic and Spirit in Hegel," in Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology, ed. Mike Higton (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007); "Balthasar and Difference," in Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology, ed. Mike Higton (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007); "The Deflections of Desire."
\textsuperscript{66} "Logic and Spirit," 80.
\textsuperscript{67} See, for example Eric David Perl, Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite, Suny Series in Ancient Greek Philosophy (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 112.
nence. It is in this context that Milbank also argues for ‘a positive case for a postmodern retrieval of the premodern soul of reciprocity.’ But what does he mean?

Milbank first suggests that ‘effectively, with Descartes, the soul died, and the subject was born.’ Whereas for Aristotle and Aquinas the human being ‘precisely as soul’ was not closed within its own interior space, but was rather radically opened out to the movements and patterns of the cosmos. Despite its deepest interiority it was also ‘in a manner all things,’ a universe of meaning and mystery. Whereas Descartes opens up a fissure between the subject and its body, seeing the latter as a mechanism to be driven by the former, the soul was never set over-against the body, but rather was the body’s form, its intelligibility. Even, suggests Milbank, rather than standing above time in bodiless contemplation, ‘the human soul, while time prevails, is within time and subject to change and mutation.’ Even the categories of objective and subjective ‘were thoroughly confused’ in this ancient understanding of the soul. Meaning was written into the world itself and not just in the mind, and, conversely, the soul, containing ‘all worlds,’ was still radically contingent and mobile. ‘Psyche was primarily an event or series of events.’

Once again an open, enchanted world is transposed into a closed, mechanical system. Descartes substitutes for ‘the soul as event’ a subject which is only ‘an empty, contentless “thinking thing,”’ a passive observer of an objective world that is ‘paradoxically able to exercise a power of pure Promethean techne now indifferent … to ends underwritten by transcendence.’ Whereas Milbank sees the interaction of souls as always reciprocal as together they establish a shared world of embodied meaning, Cartesian subjectivity allows only for the ‘mere mutual respect for freedom.’ Here Milbank is suggesting that this shared embodiment – the social and liturgical world of symbolic interaction and ritualised practice – is lost as the contracting disembodied subject is formed, a subject that only passively represents its world and technologically dominates it.

70 Ibid., 337.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 See also Pickstock’s contrasting of the liturgical city with the city of modernity in Catherine Pickstock, After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).
This enclosing of the world around a newly isolated self is a narrative followed by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, a project in deep sympathy with Milbank’s own. Taylor locates the movement to the secular in what he terms the ‘social imaginary’ – not simply a theory, but more a matter of ‘contemporary lived understanding.’ Like Milbank, Taylor sees a gradual sliding away from a medieval vision this time articulated in five stages. These are: (i) a shift in the location of meaning from the world to the mind, what we might call a subjective turn inward, where the medieval ‘porous self’ becomes the modern ‘buffered self.’ (ii) A turn away from the social where ‘the buffered self is essentially the self which is aware of the possibility of disengagement.’ (iii) A reduction in the meaning of life where there is no longer any felt tension between now and eternity; the end of carnival (and the beginning of protest?) (iv) A different sense of time. No longer is time enfolded liturgically, but is now only encountered as ‘a uniform, univocal secular time.’ (v) A movement away from cosmos to universe, where the world is now seen in terms of ‘an autonomous, independent “meaning” that is unhooked from any sort of transcendent dependence.’ Taylor narrates this move to the secular as ‘a great disembedding.’ Whereas in premodern society there can be discerned a sense of ‘triple embedding’ where ‘human agents are embedded in society, society in the cosmos, and the cosmos incorporates the divine,’ now a ‘disembedded, buffered, individualist view of the self seeps into our social imaginary.’ Throughout his narrative Taylor, like Milbank, emphasises that all of this is only a take on reality (a *mythos*, to use a more Milbankian term), what we often take for granted is contingent and contestable. As Smith writes, ‘our secular age is the product of creative new options, an entire reconfiguration of meaning.’

In a paper entitled “The Politics of the Soul,” Milbank links his understanding of the soul to the ancient Platonic vision of the *polis*, where both soul and city become sites for

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75 Ibid., 41-42.
76 Ibid., 59.
78 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 146.
79 Ibid., 152.
80 Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 45.
81 Ibid., 47.
the instructions of desire.\textsuperscript{82} If the sophists divided up the human between nature and culture, in which nature is ‘inexorable and meaningless’ and about the ‘inciting of blind passions,’ whereas culture, ‘shaped by law, is entirely wilful, conventional and artificial,’\textsuperscript{83} Plato decisively rejects such a division. Plato instead stresses the ‘integral reality of the human’ where the cultural is but a further shaping of the natural and both are to be guided by a higher transcendent principle. Milbank sees contemporary liberal political thought as replicating the dangerous divide of the sophists, splitting the soul ‘between the invading ravages of egoistic nature on the one hand and the arbitrary contrivances of the human will on the other.’\textsuperscript{84} Contrary to this division Plato holds that both city and soul, public and private, need to be opened-out to ‘a vision of transcendence’ if they are not to be reduced to competing arenas of conflictual violence. It is Plato, suggests Milbank, who discerns that the private and public are to be mediated by liturgical practice, a mediation that has all but vanished from the contemporary context.\textsuperscript{85}

Milbank believes this lack of mediation in contemporary liberalism ‘erodes the very political field which it claims to serve,’\textsuperscript{86} and he sees this happening in three interrelating ways. First as liberalism begins to ‘deconstruct’ human constructions of religion, culture and tradition, asserting that ‘every artificial construct is merely arbitrary,’ all it finally manages to deconstruct ‘are the works of liberalism itself.’\textsuperscript{87} Alongside this deconstructive activity, liberalism threatens the political with a reduction to the purely economic, where an aggressive and endless capitalistic expansionism is the only good that can be imagined. Finally, it reduces any sense of the transcendent good to an association with conflict and warfare. But contrary to this fundamentally pessimistic vision, ‘human culture could never have arisen without practices of trust: of gratuitous gift, counter-giving and gratuitous giving again which anthropologists have long known forms the main bond of all human societies.’\textsuperscript{88} This means that for Milbank society is more fundamental than law or contract, politics or economics. But even as the reciprocity of gift-exchange

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 96.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 97.
\textsuperscript{85} See Pickstock, \textit{After Writing}.
\textsuperscript{86} Milbank, “The Politics of the Soul,” 101.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 104.
have now been eclipsed, Milbank looks to the Church to enact a 'practice of reciprocity beyond law and contract.'

It is clear that for Milbank 'the real issue is soul verses subject.'

In order to reject the subject ... we would have to recover the soul – or no doubt rework it in a postmodern fashion which stressed even more its links to time, event, embodiment and language.

It is important to note here, that this is not just a return to the premodern. Indeed, Milbank himself wants to generate a counter-modern vision that takes up a different stress on human creativity and poiesis. In this way Milbank suggests that the real 'turn to the subject' was not Descartes, but is rather to be found in the 'deepened Renaissance sense of temporality, historicity, human creativity and the dormant powers of nature.' Once more there is an agreement between Milbank and Taylor who sees a new emphasis on nature, embodiment, and particularity in late medieval and Renaissance thought as 'primarily a revolution in devotion, not metaphysics.' This vision of the human self is 'a deepening of the Augustinian,' where 'the human power to innovate itself attends to and mediates the divine inexhaustibility.' But this radical creativity and openness is foreclosed by Descartes who 'seeks security outside the flux of passage.' The same can be said for the Cartesian will, an abstract and indifferent self-directing and self-governing power. But this had never been the understanding of will in the Platonic or Augustinian tradition, where will was itself caught up in the erotics of desire, drawn beyond itself in a context of yearning and response for the transcendent good. Ultimately, however, 'the infinite and indifferent will in Descartes is of a piece with his metaphysics of causa sui. Self-affection is in God self-causing, the willed priority of God even over himself in himself.'

Milbank, like Williams, sees an eclipsing of the language of the soul in contemporary expressions of the self. A new emphasis on construction and will has meant a transformation of soul into subject, but this has paradoxically lifted the self above its own temporality and embodiment to be abstracted away into an arbitrary expression of will.

89 Ibid., 107.
90 "The Soul of Reciprocity Part One," 339.
91 Ibid., 361.
92 Taylor, A Secular Age, 41.
93 Milbank, "The Soul of Reciprocity Part One," 365.
Conclusion

For Milbank a retrieval of the language of the soul is not simply nostalgic, a re-articulation of medieval themes of participation and mediation, but rather a new vision that combines a sense of the sacred with an ‘alternatively modern’ emphasis on *factum*: the constructions of culture and language. Milbank argues that this alternative trajectory of modernity is still possible, and the following chapters chart such a trajectory for the self.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed Williams’ and Milbank’s interrogation of the modern self. Even as both dislodge the ‘timeless rationality’ of modernity as just another construction, they go on to stress that every narrative of the self is implicated and moulded by culture: the mobile forces of language and history that shape and re-shape identity. Two claims have emerged. The first is that the self can only be known as it is enfolded in divine gift. Williams argues that it is only in relation to this divine *non aliud* that the homelessness and fragmentation of the self can be honestly articulated. And Milbank asserts that for difference to be imaged without conflict, then it can only be narrated in an economy and exchange of language that is non-competitive and non-rivalrous. This vision will be worked out in chapter 2.

With Williams there is the need to affirm that *suspicion* does not exhaust the possibilities of the self but is to be enfolded in a relationality made possible by the divine *Other*. And with Milbank that *dominium* does not exhaust the possibilities of the self and difference can be reimagined as a narrative of peace. This enfolding of suspicion and recasting of difference will be attempted in the next chapter as I explore the influence of Augustine on both Williams and Milbank. I will also argue two further points in chapter 2. First that a timeless and atomised self needs to be reconfigured as a self magnetised by a non-rivalrous desire which mobilises the self in time and in community through an infinite ascent into the desire of God. Such a vision will emerge in Williams’ and Milbank’s engagement with Gregory of Nyssa. Second I will argue that a relentlessly secular self carving out its own sphere of autonomy and wilful manipulation of its world is to be shaped into a self whose dynamic creativity participates in a heavenly making and
where self, society and cosmos can once more come together in a renewed sacramen-
tality. This will become clear as Milbank reconstructs the vision of Pseudo-Dionysius.

The second claim of this chapter is that the self can only be known in its 'cultural
shaping,' as it produces culture and is produced by culture. This cultural shaping is an
embrace of history, time and language, a participatory artificing that cannot be reduced
to the merely instrumental, of technology or control. This vision will be worked out in
chapter 3 where with Hegel the self is known in its negotiations and [mis]recognitions
with others in a shared sociality, and in conversation with Vico where the self comes to
be through its own 'cultural making.'

What does a 'postmodern' retrieval of the soul look like? Paradoxically it is about being
thrown back into culture: the endless negotiations of sociality in all its conflictual prom-
ise, a retrieval of language and the costliness of time and history in which we can never
be the sole authors of our own stories. It will involve a re-casting of human creativity in
a participatory context, where poiesis enfolds techne as that which mutually shapes our
world in a reconfigured eros rather than a wilful domination and desire to control. A cre-
ativity that breaks through immanence as an echo and anticipation of the transcendent.
It is also a recovery of the 'giftedness' of the self, its reciprocal relationship to a divine
other who calls it into a being beyond itself and a relationship beyond rivalry and suspi-
cion. It is to the full articulation of this vision that I now turn.
Re-imagining the Self I: Pre-modern Trajectories

Walter Benjamin imagines the task of the 'historical materialist' as different from the preeminent model of historiography. Not looking to reconstruct what would remain a fundamentally inaccessible past, he used the voices of the past in order 'to construct a present.'¹ It is this construction of the present that this chapter is interested in, in terms of the creative re-imagining of the self: how it is to be reconstructed in the present beyond narratives of endless fragmentation and suspicion and contexts of rivalry and conflict. Can the self be imagined beyond the enclosures of finitude? Both Williams and Milbank are theologians who take this construction of the present seriously and conduct their theological retrievals of the past as creative dialogues that feed the contemporary imagination. Williams writes about the constant need for theology to be open to 'the immediacy of shock and a realignment of how you talk,'² and Milbank refers to the Word made strange, the need for a repetition-in-difference for the dynamics of truth to be heard once again. In this chapter Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius are to be read as 'texts that linger and words that explode,'³ detonating in contemporary sites of meaning, and disrupting and reconfiguring contemporary constructions of the self.

But why these three? Each of these three writers has exerted a strong influence on the theological imaginations of both Williams and Milbank. If Gregory is not quite so central – with Milbank nervous that the denial of distance in God means there can be

no language in God, and with Williams questioning his fundamental optimism about the power of the human soul to imitate the divine – it would be nonetheless difficult to imagine either theology without Gregory’s double emphasis on *epektasis* and infinity. Indeed, the soul’s stretching upward and outward as it becomes more and more filled with God provides much of the dynamics to these two contemporary theological projects. It is almost impossible to overestimate the significance of Augustine for either Milbank or Williams. Milbank thinks of his own project in terms of a ‘post-modern Augustinianism’ and it is possible to read his *Theology and Social Theory* as a kind of postmodern *City of God*; and Williams’ whole project centres around the dislocations of the self and its endless negotiations of the political as it strives to find a home between cross and resurrection. If Milbank chooses to focus on the two cities as a deconstruction of pagan conceptions of society in its ancient and contemporary iterations, Williams articulates the awesome fragility of the self in all its exiles and homecomings as its loves are shattered and remade in confrontation with divine love. And Pseudo-Dionysius, too quickly dismissed by Williams as a static and individualistic thinker (with Williams preferring the dynamic ontology of Maximus the Confessor), is crucial to Milbank’s retrieval of the theurgic. Milbank argues that a whole alternative theological trajectory begins with Dionysius, coalescing around the theme of culture, as human material shaping and language is suffused with Spirit and co-creative with the divine. Milbank delights in the Dionysian promise of universalism in which the Church finally enfolds the cosmos in an endless dynamic relationality.

Each of these patristic thinkers are of value in working through the tensions of the self explored in the first chapter, the paradoxes of a self that is to be uttered both in its cultural formations, but also as gift. Gregory of Nyssa sets in motion a self that had been enclosed in finitude, reconceiving desire as an endless journey into infinity. Much more than a lonely journey inward and upward, the soul opens up in sacramental and virtuous acts as an endless ascent into the *eros* of God. Augustine allows the full burden of ‘postmodern suspicion’ to be felt, but suggests that the anarchic meanings of both self and world can be given expression in a narrative of loving donation and peaceful difference. For Augustine the spiritual and political are not held at a distance, but rather it is the spiritual that makes the social possible. Pseudo-Dionysius re-enchants the cosmos
so that the self, once cut off from society and inwardly turned towards a world of its own arbitrary making, can begin to move outward in creative expression once again. Here culture is re-imagined as a divine-making. Factum – once the sphere of dominium and conflict – is reconfigured in terms of a dynamic and porous relationality and human activity anticipates its transcendent, donating source.

**Re-reading Gregory of Nyssa**

In this section I will introduce Gregory of Nyssa’s writing on ‘the infinity of God’ and ‘the infinite progress of the human soul’ as it is explored in the writings of Milbank and Williams. First I will follow a close reading of Milbank’s “The Force of Identity,” found in *The Word Made Strange*, drawing out the significance of what Milbank terms ‘active reception.’ Then I will go on to explore Williams’ discussion of Gregory in *The Wound of Knowledge* and “Macrina’s Deathbed Revisited” in which ‘what matters is the *epektasis* of love and longing, permeating the whole of life.’ I will then offer some of my own concluding remarks as to the emerging themes of infinity, temporality, mystical ascent and desire.

**Milbank’s Gregory: The Self and ‘Active Reception’**

In “The Force of Identity,” Milbank discusses Gregory of Nyssa and the relation of being and gift. The category of gift – reciprocal exchange – recasts *being* in terms of mobility and relationality. ‘I am concerned,’ says Milbank, ‘with the relevance of Gregory to contemporary debates concerning the philosophy of being on the one hand, to the theological category of gift on the other.’ While stressing the importance of *apatheia* (the contemplative stilling of desire), Gregory nevertheless values ‘relationality, communication and growth … generation, and embodiment.’ Milbank discerns in this paradox a

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7 Ibid.
redefinition of activity beyond categories of self-sufficiency and autonomy, and instead becoming a matter of being ‘both receptive and donating’. Milbank calls such a state ‘active reception’ and explores its meaning under four headings: reputation (or doxa), generation, growth, and embodiment. In each case the theme of active reception is recast in terms of gift: reciprocity, difference and excess.

First, argues Milbank, Gregory mobilises doxa so that reputation is not some state to be possessed, but rather the constant transmission of glory which is finally imagined as a passing on of glory to God. Gregory contrasts worldly glory or reputation, (which Gregory argues ‘have no real hold in being’) with ‘a different and more abiding doxa, which includes a more positive view of both processes of historical transmission and public visibility.”8 In discussing first ‘historical transmission’ Milbank points us to On the Making of Man in which Gregory debates with himself whether he should simply praise his brother Basil’s work by leaving it as it is, or whether he should furnish it with his own ‘inferior’ conclusion. Gregory goes on to justify his adaption of his brother’s writing by arguing that his greatness will be praised all the more if it can be seen to have inspired and energised the writings of a disciple. ‘Basil’s ‘identity’ is no longer complete and bound up in his own works,’ but now ‘resides in the spirit of his writing, in a certain force which can communicate itself. Basil and Gregory come together in a mutuality, a kind of exchange as each donates and receives from the other. As Ludlow writes, ‘Gregory’s theology is a non-identical repetition of his brother’s ... [and] this feeds into Milbank’s conception of his own theological task as re-narration.”9

The same reciprocal mobility is at work in the second theme of ‘public virtue’ in which human deeds no longer attract praise to themselves but rather participate in a virtuous exchange the excesses of which point towards the plenitude of God. Milbank comments on Gregory’s On The Christian Mode of Life, where he asks whether it is good to reveal one’s good deeds or else to keep them secret, in the light of Jesus’ apparently contradictory words in the sermon on the mount about not seeking earthly reward, but also about letting your light shine before others. Milbank argues that Gregory resolves this appar-

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8 Ibid., 196.
ent contradiction by suggesting that we pass on this giftedness of glory as it belongs only to God ‘and though we receive it, we can only receive it actively (else it would not be our virtue) to the limit of our participating capacity.’ Arguing against Eunomius who sees God’s glory as ‘incommunicable,’ Gregory instead believes that mobile and contingent creatures can ‘mirror’ this glory back and forward, but that it can never be grasped as we find ourselves ‘in a state of constant flux.’ Milbank understands Gregory’s thinking as a kind of ‘doxologic’: ‘the constant transmission of glory which is all the more one’s own insofar as another person can receive it and repeat its force.’ Instead of praise being the possession of one person or another, it becomes much more a matter of reciprocity and exchange between mobile and porous subjects. In all of this we can discern a certain kind of ‘repetition in difference,’ not simply an imitation or copying of another’s action or work, but rather a taking forward, an extending differently, that paradoxically sustains the same.

Milbank’s second area of consideration is that of generation where excess this time is found in the dynamic relationality of the Trinity. He begins with a Trinitarian replay of the theme of doxa, this time recasting it in the language of generation: ‘the Son is the Father’s doxa; without the Son the Father is without doxa and the glory of both is the Holy Spirit.’ Noticing that creedal expressions of this reciprocal glory are given in terms of generation the question now becomes ‘how this generation was possible without passion?’ Once more Gregory exposes Eunomius’ understanding as inadequate for Eunomius can only conceive of power in terms of the exercise of will – like that of an emperor – rather than as something innately dynamic. Gregory has a rather different conception of dynamis, seeing God as intrinsically self-giving and donating – perhaps like rain or fire – producing a variety of effects (or works) from the same power. Gregory, argues Milbank, ‘defends not just God as incomprehensible ousia, but also God as incomprehensible dynamis – as inherently giving and effecting (and affecting).’

11 Ibid., 197.
13 Milbank, The Word Made Strange, 198.
14 Ibid., 199.
Gregory employs and retracts a number of metaphors to draw his readers closer to this understanding of God, the image he constantly returns to is that of fire. 'Fire, like mind, is in ceaseless motion, inherently contagious – it exists to effect and it cannot but heat.'15 For Gregory this is just what the Father is like.

Milbank goes on to recognise that Gregory speaks more often of one dynamis than one ousia in his considerations of the Trinity. In this way Milbank suggests that such ‘active receptivity’ should be taken into the life of God with Gregory articulating a creative tension between an unaffected/unaffected ousia and an affecting/affected dynamis in God.16 This means that there is a certain dynamic element within the Trinity, with dynamis not only shared between the Trinitarian persons, but passed from one to another. In all of this God remains incomprehensible, and any knowledge of him is no mere grasping of presence, but rather an ‘infinite bestowing and bestowing back again,’ a ‘doxological account of knowing’ that ‘extends even to human understanding.’ It seems the world’s very contingency and mobility refracts – but never captures – this incomprehensible power.17 Even as Milbank goes beyond Gregory here – reading him with ‘Augustinian spectacles’18 – he manages to capture something of the dynamic relationality of the Trinity.

Milbank’s third context is that of growth, particularly in terms of the threefold nature of the soul, ‘intellective, sensitive, nutritive’ (all taken from Aristotle), which is nevertheless one in Gregory’s thought. The question here is about how the one rational soul can be linked with apparently passive impulses.19 Here Milbank distinguishes those ‘passionate aspects of the fallen body’ (hormai) – the need to eat and the need to procreate for example – which are part of ‘the fallen economy’ but are not sinful in themselves, and actual ‘passions’ (pathe) whereby ‘the rational soul is dominated by such impulses’ – consumed by greed or burning with lust. Gregory argues that hormai can be put to good use, where ‘desire for things can generate desire for God.’20 In this way feelings – the bodily movements of desire and self-preservation – can be harnessed for the spiritual

15  Ibid.
16  Ibid., 201.
17  Ibid.
18  Ludlow, Gregory of Nyssa, 256.
20  Ibid., 203.
growth of the soul. Even if suffering, passive desire and self-preservation have no final eschatological significance, Milbank contends that ‘an eros proper to the soul remains.’

This eros is without passion, not subordinate to reason and will, but one with them. In this way Milbank argues that for Gregory the soul is ‘relational and diverse,’ not due to it being made up of many parts, but rather ‘as a dynamis moving from relative stasis to relative ecstasis.’

The allusions to the sharing of power and glory in the Trinitarian life are obvious and it is here that Milbank contends that the soul is a movement ‘of “active reception” whereby in receiving we actually become what we receive: the triune God.’

Neither Milbank and Williams see the soul as some abstract part of our interiority, but rather as the orientation of the body in its linguistic, sacramental, relational and cultural aspects.

Milbank’s fourth category is embodiment, which quickly expands to a focus on the ecclesial and social as non-identical repetitions of the incarnation. In The Soul and the Resurrection, Gregory argues that resurrection is possible because the soul ‘re-members’ the body where its disparate elements ‘are in some way marked forever by the bond of that particular soul.’ However, Gregory asserts that the body will not return from a particular age or period of a person’s life as this has to do with the ‘revolutions of passion,’ but that rather the body that returns will be freed from passions, paradoxically by the passion of Jesus Christ himself. The focus on Christ’s passion is central here, for: ‘in Christ’s “passion” one has for Gregory nonetheless the supreme instance of active reception.’

Even as God’s activity in the world, it is made known in its opposite – weakness and suffering – and so begins to subvert dichotomies of power and weakness, wisdom and foolishness, activity and passivity by revealing that the Logos’ greatest dynamis is his subjection to suffering. In this way, ‘Milbank rediscovers the Christological “hub” of Gregory’s eschatology and soteriology through his core notion of active reception.’

Throughout this discussion, Gregory stresses the collectivity of Christ’s body, as the Church. In his Commentary on the Song of Songs, Gregory’s mystical quest is not a soli-

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 204.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 205.
26 Ludlow, Gregory of Nyssa, 257.
tary and interior vision of God, but rather one that is ‘mirrored’ back and forwards by
the community of the church. This means that ‘there is an infinite progress not just tem-
porally forwards – but also spatially outwards,’ where the mystical is extended beyond
itself into the ecclesial and the social. In this sense ‘interiority’ and ‘exteriority’ speak of
the same ‘speculative’ or mirror-like quality of creation, refracting the doxa or glory of
God and participating in its dynamis. This means that ‘for Gregory not only can the soul
be a pure mirror, also it is only thus as an aspect of the wider mirror which is the Church,
the Body of Christ, eschatologically co-terminous with the redeemed cosmos’ or in Greg-
ory’s own words:

the friends of the Bridegroom see the Sun of Justice by looking upon the face of the
Church as though it were a pure mirror, and thus He can be seen by His reflection.28

Instead of secular understandings of the political where passions are to be suppressed by
a violent ‘rational government’ or following Plotinus into the apolitical retreat into the
inwardness of the soul, ‘Gregory discovers the body and society as a site of pure activi-
ty.’29 In this way the soul ascends upwards in contemplation and outwards in virtue as
epektasis is re-imagined as the stretching of the soul towards Christ who is through all,
with all and in all.

Williams’ Gregory: The Self – A Vocation of Desire

In his chapter on Gregory of Nyssa in The Wound of Knowledge, Rowan Williams sees
Gregory’s key insight as the stretching or straining forward and beyond of the human
self into the infinity of God, the epektasis of the soul. As Gregory himself writes, ‘in the
case of virtue we have learned from the Apostle that its one limit of perfection is the
fact that it has no limit.’30 This straining forward without end is in part due to the on-
tological distance between God and humanity in Gregory’s thought, his rejection of the
Hellenistic doctrine of the kinship between the soul and God. Although Gregory follows
the fathers before him – most notably Origen – in believing that the soul is ‘nobler’ and

27  Milbank, The Word Made Strange, 206.
28  Quoted in ibid., 208.
29  Ibid.
    30.
'higher' than the body, the real distance opens out between the divine and both body and soul. Now intellectual knowledge of God is impossible. Williams argues that this means a subtle shift in Gregory’s writing, away ‘from the experiences of the interior life to the whole history of human growth’ where virtue is as significant – if not more so – as the inward ascent of the soul. Williams and Milbank are in complete agreement here in understanding that interiority and exteriority are not competitive. The ascent of the soul in prayer and solitude is its outward movement in sacramental action and virtuous relationality.

Williams points to an understanding of ‘participation in the divine’ as central to Gregory’s thought, but also sees him as revising this understanding so that participation is not to be understood in terms of God’s ‘ousia’ or being – not in terms of what God is – but rather in terms of what he does. Or as Williams puts it, ‘to become God, then, is to act as God acts, in love, in poverty, in compassion.’ It is here that Williams considers Gregory’s distinction of ‘power’ (dynamis), ‘energy’ (energeia) and ‘substance’ (ousia), arguing that the ousia remains ‘entirely transcendent and uncommunicable’ and that to know God is instead to know and participate in his ‘acts’ or ‘power.’ There is a difficulty here, as Williams seems to be conflating dynamis and energeia, whereas Gregory – if we are to follow Michel Rene Barnes’ insightful analysis – instead draws ousia and dynamis together. As Barnes’ suggests, in ‘Gregory’s own theology, we see that he describes transcendent causality in terms which suggest the ontological unity that he believes exists between divine nature and divine causality. In this way – as Milbank has also shown – a sense of generativity and power are drawn into the divine essence itself, infinite and therefore incomprehensible, but no longer static and unmoving.

Williams constantly draws together Gregory’s doctrine of God – in terms of freedom and infinity – with his ascetical thought. The Christian life is imagined as ‘a journey into infinity,’ and ‘this journey is always marked by desire, by hope and longing, never coming to possess or control its object.’ In Gregory’s understanding,

31 Williams, The Wound of Knowledge, 55.
32 Ibid., 56.
faith is always, not only in this life, a longing and trust directed away from itself towards an object to which it will never be adequate, which it will never comprehend. God is what we have not yet understood, the sign of a strange and unpredictable future.34

Once again, Christian faith and life are not seen in terms of abiding presence, static enlightenment, or a grasping attainment, but rather in terms of fluidity and movement. Indeed, Williams goes so far as to argue that here ‘human nature is seen as essentially restless, precarious, mobile and variegated, because of its orientation towards a reality outside itself.’35 This accords well with Gregory’s understanding of what Milbank terms ‘the ontological difference’ between Creator and creation. Our very mobility distinguishes us from the divine but also allows in some sense for our ‘participation’ in it and ‘mirroring’ of it.36 Williams goes on to say that ‘the movement of history and of biography is made possible and meaningful by its reference to God who meets us in history, yet extends beyond it, is always, so to speak, ahead of it.’37

Gregory sees human life as a pilgrimage characterized by longing. Williams highlights that for Gregory this journey is not motivated by fear or reward, but rather the ‘stirring of desire’ which is to be awakened by the divine beauty, and this awakening is highlighted by Gregory in his Homilies on the Song of Songs. Exploring the ascent of the soul through the biblical works of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and finally the Song itself, Gregory writes about being ‘roused to the participation of good things, not out of any fear or compulsion, but out of desire and longing,’ about the need to ‘set fire to that principle of desire,’ about ‘our soul’s motion of desire toward the invisible Beauty that is beyond anything grasped by the senses,’ and finally about ‘our yearning desire for Beauty.’38 God is active here as that which mobilizes attraction and ignites desire. The pilgrimage of the soul is a movement from tyranny to freedom, and just as the burning bush was the beginning of exodus for the Hebrews, so the incarnate Jesus is the beginning of our exodus from sin.39

It is in the incarnation that God penetrates ‘the entirety of human experience’40 in

34 Williams, The Wound of Knowledge, 57-58.
35 Ibid., 58.
36 For a sustained analysis of the ontological difference see “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics” in Milbank, The Word Made Strange, 36-52.
37 Williams, The Wound of Knowledge, 58.
40 Williams, The Wound of Knowledge, 59.
order to transform it from the inside-out, and here suffering and even death are taken up so that resurrection life can suffuse all things. As Gregory succinctly puts it, ’with his return from death, our mortal race begins its return to immortal life.’41 This ’call to freedom is a harsh and menacing thing as well as a promise and a hope’ as it draws human life into conflict and tension. Despite this emphasis on struggle, decision and human transformation, Williams argues that for Gregory this is never the struggle or decision of an unaided or arbitrary human will, but it is only a modelling on Christ’s death and resurrection and a calling on the power of the Holy Spirit that makes spiritual progress possible.

In his conceptualising of this spiritual journey Gregory relativises the importance of the nous. The nous – the discursive, intellectual aspect of the soul – is as creaturely as the body and so just as much in need of conversion and transformation. Whereas the divine was the natural home of the intellect for many of the Neoplatonists, Gregory ’makes the nous homeless again.’42 Although Williams is surely right here, as he unpicks his theme he seems to put what we might call his own ’Lutheran gloss’ on Gregory, arguing that,

> when all that is non-rational is put aside, and the soul or intellect is naked before God, it confronts a stranger: the uncreated Lord is still and always will be on the far side of an unbridgeable gulf, and the soul will not ever be able to rest in the security of perfect union in the Platonic sense.43

There seems to be something about the menace of Luther’s Deus absconditus here, which seems alien to Gregory. Whereas there is indeed an ’unbridgeable gulf’ between the nous and the ousia of God, this seems more to do with the infinity of riches and beauty in God, rather than the dark paradoxes known to the later Lutheran and Hegelian systems.44 Indeed, as Williams goes on to say, what matters is the longing of desire which shapes the whole of life. Like Moses we only see the ’back-parts’ of God, ’the figure of the Lord leading us further and further out of self into his own country and his own life.’ Once more these ’back-parts’ of God are not so much the darkly hidden and inscrutable divine will

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43 Ibid.
44 For an in-depth discussion of this aspect of Luther’s thought see Alister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough*, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 161-81.
found in Luther, but, rather, the joyful presence of the bridegroom drawing the soul forward in playful and desirous love.

Williams sees Gregory as demythologising the soul: no longer is an incorruptible soul imprisoned in a changeable body, but now both are set in motion by desire for God. Now, ‘the drama of the alien soul flying from the bondage of the senses’ is re-narrated as ‘the very different “drama” of soul and senses together struggling to live into and assimilate a truth greater than themselves.’\textsuperscript{45} What Danielou terms Gregory’s ‘revolution in thought’ is to subvert the classical equation of change equals evil and immutability equals good.\textsuperscript{46} Instead Gregory develops a new understanding where change equals created good, and immutability equals the goodness of the divine essence. Paradoxically it seems, ‘the soul’s only security is in change.’ Here Williams points to Gregory’s Life of Moses and ‘one of the greatest paradoxes of faith, that faithfulness in virtue is the principle of change; while, without change, there is no stability in perfection. To stop growing and changing is to fall away from stability.’\textsuperscript{47}

In such a schema, Williams suggests that vocation and choice play a central role, what is important is ‘making one’s life, making one’s soul, in a certain fashion, deciding, developing, intending and desiring, in cooperative synergy with God.’\textsuperscript{48} Although Williams adds the cautionary ‘in a certain fashion’ as it would be pushing things too far to argue that Gregory sees ‘soul-making’ as anything but the work of God, Williams is here moving us into an area of significant concern for his own theology, a trajectory that will be significant for the rest of this thesis. Another subtle departure from Gregory is when Williams suggests that Gregory’s thought combines ‘a profound pessimism about natural endowments and natural knowledge’ with ‘a profound optimism about the freedom of the human will when enlightened and enriched by the life of God.’\textsuperscript{49} I have not detected any such pessimism in Gregory’s writings. Yes, the nous is limited, but the human soul does have the freedom to choose the good and live a life of virtue once it orients itself to the divine. It is not until we meet Augustine that we encounter a more pessimis-

\textsuperscript{45} Williams, \textit{The Wound of Knowledge}, 64.
\textsuperscript{47} Williams, \textit{The Wound of Knowledge}, 64.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
tic – and to my mind more realistic – understanding of the fragility of human freedom. The final goal of Gregory’s journey is *apatheia*. But once again Gregory’s understanding proves to be subtle and challenging. This is no longer the complete eradication of the passions, but rather the integration and disciplining of every aspect of the human as it orientates itself towards the divine. This means the human person is called forward beyond even the ‘intellectual,’ beyond discursive knowledge, into the darkness of faith and the life of virtue where, ‘knowledge of God can only be seen as personal, relational, evolving,’ as ‘a project for human life.’ Not a final vision or status to possess, but the vocation of the human self as it is opened out towards the other.

In his “Macrina’s Deathbed Revisited,” Williams continues his engagement with Gregory, this time in terms of the soul as embodied and active agent. Whereas Williams concedes that Gregory is indeed, ‘the inheritor, albeit remotely, of the tensions thus set up’ in Plato, he nevertheless believes that a closer reading of *On the Soul*, together with Gregory’s *On the Making of Man* will generate a far more subtle and original anthropological vision.50 Here Gregory begins to see the soul as that which effects motion, ‘an animating power that works in conjunction with sensible life,’ which is both ‘an initiator of projects and responsive or susceptible … to a material environment.’51 Intelligence is both active but also responsive to the material, in a certain sense shaping and shaped by this material. We are not far from Milbank’s *active receptivity* here (indeed, it seems that Milbank develops this concept from a reading of the chapter). At this point Williams highlights a distinction that Gregory makes between *ousia* and *physis*: the soul in its abstract intellectual state, and ‘the more complex lived reality of soul as animating a body.’52 It is only this second concept of soul which is ever encountered or known. This is the distinction Gregory makes in his *The Making of Man* where the body *shows* the nature of the soul, where the ‘music’ of the body communicates the soul’s reality, or where, again, the life of the body shows forth the ‘history of the soul.’53 Or as Williams puts it elsewhere, ‘the body is the soul … a meaning portion of matter.’54

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50 “Macrina’s Deathbed,” 230.
51 Ibid., 233.
52 Ibid., 234.
53 See ibid.
In order to show how passion and passivity come to be part of a life that should be ‘purely active and self-motivated,’ Gregory embarks on what Williams terms ‘a bold de-mythologising of Origen.’ In creation God foresees ‘the instability and infidelity of our created intellects,’ and so ‘unites them to animal bodies’ which ‘have natural and material processes of reproduction and self-transmission,’ so that the life of the soul can be nourished and sustained. Once more hormai (animal instinct) is not seen as sinful in itself, whereas passion (pathe) in the sense of uncontrolled desire is. This means that the life of body and soul begins together and indeed grows together. As On the Soul beautifully puts it:

So just as the growth of a sprouting seed proceeds gradually to its goal, in the same manner also when a human being is formed the power of the soul appears according to the measure of the bodily stature. First the power enters into the embryo which is formed within the womb through the capacity for receiving nourishment and growing, but afterwards it brings the grace of sense-perception to the infant which comes forth into light. Then, as an adult plant produces fruit, it gradually reveals the faculty of reason, not all at once, but increasing along with the growth of the child in the normal order of development.56

Williams takes two things from Gregory’s understanding of the human soul. The first is the sense of ‘a progressive integration of “animating power” with the material world,’ a ‘conserving and sustaining force’ that shapes and mobilises bodily impulse. Here Williams discerns ‘no absolute gulf between the animal and the human: the difference is that the zotike dunamis at last comes to full awareness, to the capacity for freely shaping its animality and its environment.’56 Despite On the Soul’s insistence on a pure, impassable psyche untouched by any motion, this only remains an abstraction in Gregory’s thought, and the human self is constantly seen as embodied and historical, subject to transformation and change. As Gregory writes,

our nature is like the fire on a wick which seems to be always the same because the continuity of its motions shows that it is inseparably united with itself, but in truth it is always replacing itself and never remains the same ... As long as our nature is alive, it has no stillness. Either the body is being filled or it is emptying itself, or actually it is involved in both.57

56 Williams, “Macrina’s Deathbed,” 239.
The stability of the embodied subject is sustained by intense motion, an endless creative and re-creative movement.

Williams’ second insight that he gleans from Gregory is his objection to the idea that there will come a point at which desire disappears. Here Williams is following closely to the argument of On the Soul in chapter six of that work. In this chapter our created nature is seen as always entirely in motion and is contrasted with God’s nature which is utterly self-sustaining. This means that when the soul is purified and made ‘like God’ there can be nothing restless left to it born of lack. Only love will remain, and yet – argues Gregory – ‘there is no limit to the operation of love’ only ‘the limitless and unbounded good.’

Williams sees in Gregory a sense of eschatological longing and mobility, no longer characterised by lack or restlessness, but rather by the attraction of the infinite. Here, ‘the passionless love of the perfected saint continues to be a search, a movement into new discoveries … a renewal of wonder.’ More than that, it seems that this divine ‘desire’ is ‘unrealisable without the force of desire in our present empirical humanity to “launch” it.’ It is worth quoting Williams in full here:

The conviction of our dependence on an unchangeably loving God draws us into a state of strictly objectless attention, love without projection or condition, moving and expanding but not restless, a kind of eros, yet only capable of being called ‘desire’ in a rather eccentric sense, because of its distance from the processes of wanting and getting, lack and satisfaction.

There is a sense of an ever-expanding desire, motivated not by lack but rather the infinite intensities of divine love.

Williams sees no opposition in Gregory’s thought between the contemplative and the ethical and ‘entering into God’s self-contemplation’ does not imply a ‘closing off of relation or mutual human charity.’ Both Williams and Milbank highlight this aspect of Gregory’s thought where the social and the ecclesial are seen to be as fundamental as interior ascent. There is the beginning of a trajectory here, one that I will follow closely: a movement from the fragmented self, dislocated in its relationship to God and to itself, moving inwards, upwards and outwards in contemplative and ecclesial life, and

58 Ibid., 81.
60 Ibid., 242.
61 Ibid., 243.
in its encounter with others through language and sociality and finally into eschatological ‘fulfilment.’ In Williams’ view, such an understanding requires ‘a serious treatment of how contingency, the particulars of biography shape spiritual identity.’ For Gregory,

that the interlocking frames of history, gender and passion form the concrete structure for the soul’s journey towards a God who is free from all of them is a paradox, perhaps, but a paradox appropriate to incarnational Christianity.62

It is in this paradox – at least in terms of contemplation, sociality, language and ecclesial and sacramental life – that this thesis finds its impetus.

Re-reading Augustine

In this section I will explore Williams’ and Milbank’s engagements with Augustine in areas of desire, language, sociality and the Trinity. First I will explore Rowan Williams’ take on Augustine’s theology of language, meaning and temporality. Then I will draw this alongside Milbank’s treatment of the sociality of the self in Augustine and the subversion of Platonic interiority. I will then go on to offer some of my own concluding remarks.

Williams and Augustine: The Self and God, Language and Desire

In The Wound of Knowledge, Rowan Williams begins his discussion of Augustine by an analysis of his Confessions, a book of questioning, exile and homecoming. ‘But where was I when I looked for you? You were there before my eyes, but I had deserted even my own self. I could not find myself, much less find you.’63 In this work, God and self slip and slide. Finding one is finding the other, and being exiled from the one is being exiled from the other. In the Confessions the self has become a question to itself, or as Marion writes, ‘the cogito, supposed to appropriate me to myself as a myself, expels me from myself and defines me by this very exile.’64 Indeed, Williams understands identity as a key theme. However, this is not about escaping to some abstract ahistorical, unchanging register. ‘Identity’ might well be ‘ultimately in the hand of God;’

62 Ibid., 245.
but this does not mean that it is a non-temporal thing. It is to be found, and in some sense made, by the infinitely painstaking attention to the contingent strangeness of remembered experience in conscious reference to God.\footnote{Williams, The Wound of Knowledge, 71.}

For Augustine the patient feeling through the contours of this life with an open faith in God ‘can make a story, a continuous reality, out of the chaos of unhappiness, “homeless” wandering, hurt and sin.’\footnote{Ibid., 72.} This requires a relentless and searching honesty, something that characterises much of Williams’ own writing.

Already Williams notices that Augustine is influenced by but transfigures neo-Platonic thought. Similarly to Plotinus, Augustine understands that humanity has indeed fallen away from oneness and unity, but he re-imagines this as more ‘a fall from the experienced harmony of self with self and self with God.’\footnote{Ibid.} The world and the depths of the soul have become a place of alienation and almost existential angst. This wandering, restless state is not the natural state of the human person, rather its home is to be found in God, where alone it can be itself, held in the knowledge and love of God. This theme of homecoming is also a recurring theme in Williams’ oeuvre. The dislocated fragments of the human self can only be woven together by the creative love of the divine, and all other attempts at cohesion and mastery lead only to illusion or delusion. As Augustine says, ‘nor do we fear that there is no home to which we can return. We fell from it; but our home is your eternity and it does not fall because we are away.’\footnote{Augustine, Confessions, 90.} Homecoming is the move from dislocation and disorder to harmony and enlightenment, but more than this, it is also a journey into relatedness.

This journey home is a long one and conversion marks its beginning, not the end, a shattering and awesome moment. Augustine puts it powerfully in his \textit{Confessions}:

\begin{quote}
You called me; you cried aloud to me; you broke my barrier of deafness. You shone upon me; your radiance enveloped me; you put my blindness to flight. You shed your fragrance about me; I drew breath and now I gasp for your sweet odour. I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am inflamed with love of your peace.\footnote{Ibid., 232.}
\end{quote}
Once more to be a Christian is to be ‘on the way’ to take seriously ‘the pain and labour of a life of unfulfilled desire, the stumbling advance towards that beauty whose compelling force first broke through the defenses of the soul, drew it out and set it on its pilgrimage.\textsuperscript{70} There is, for Augustine, no easy path to reconciliation and no short-circuit to resurrection joy, only the dark pilgrimage of cross and denial. Conversion, then, is ‘an entry into a perilous and confused world,’\textsuperscript{71} where we are wounded time after time, but where those same wounds ‘are being healed ... time and time again.’\textsuperscript{72} In all of this Williams defiantly asserts, ‘belief does not confer hesychia, the repose of the gnostic; it is the heartbreaking source of human unrest.’\textsuperscript{73}

Williams explores Augustine’s understanding of desire in conversation with Gregory of Nyssa, suggesting that if for Gregory the finally elusive and unpredictable element of life is ‘the mysterious depths of the [human] spirit itself,’ for Augustine the difficulty is ‘not so much a dimension of the spirit’ – even though Augustine is painfully aware of the mystery of the human subject – ‘as the enormous world of pressures and influenc-es in the midst of which the spirit lives.’\textsuperscript{74} Whereas for Gregory the will can master the passions, Augustine argues that reason is impotent before the swirling forces of impulse and desire, and therefore characterises the will as having less to do with reason than with passion. Williams argues that Augustine is no rationalist, but rather one who sees ‘sorrow, fear, compassion, love, delight’ as ‘the very stuff of moral and spiritual life.’\textsuperscript{75} He goes so far as to say,

\begin{quote}
 salvation has little or nothing to do with the enthronement of reason over the passions.
 Human beings are naturally passionate, vulnerable, mobile, and if their humanity is to be saved it must be without loss of all this.\textsuperscript{76}
\end{quote}

In all of this, Williams’ argues, Augustine shows a remarkable ‘candour about the human condition’ and the ‘frailty of its own foundation.’\textsuperscript{77} Even as reason fails to construct a coherent sense of self, it is God alone who gives it shape and meaning.

\textsuperscript{70} Williams, \textit{The Wound of Knowledge}, 73.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} See Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, 202.
\textsuperscript{73} Williams, \textit{The Wound of Knowledge}, 73.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 74.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 76.
Williams goes on to suggest that it is 'the life of the heart' that is central to Augustine, rather than any focus on 'discursive reason' alone. At this point Williams draws the closest parallel with Gregory, arguing that for both writers, 'contemplative knowledge can be only the knowledge of love, of desire and delight, the will consenting to the drawing of the divine beauty.' Rather than reason or rationality, it is beauty that motivates Augustine's spiritual searching. 'The vision of an indescribable loveliness that calls our hearts out of darkness, breaking down the barriers of false love, rightly ordering those desires and impulses by which we live.' It is only beauty that can lead us away from 'the dominating, organising life of the intellect,' and only the heart – not the intellect – 'can properly respond, because the heart does not seek to control, only to enjoy, and so is mobile, flexible, sensitive to all the bewildering diversity of the world.' Like Gregory, Augustine writes about the never-ceasing pilgrimage of the heart or spirit or mens, and there is to be 'no rest in mere self-awareness, because to know the self properly is to see it set in the midst of the vast landscape of God's workings, a landscape with no human map, trusting only to the hand of God.'

However, this articulation of beauty needs to be balanced by a sense of protest, that the world is not as it should be. The world is a place of mystery, but also of frustration and limit, where human encounter is fraught with risk as well as possibility. And it is here that we encounter Augustine's constantly deepening sense of the tragic. 'The vision of an indescribable loveliness that calls our hearts out of darkness, breaking down the barriers of false love, rightly ordering those desires and impulses by which we live.' It is only beauty that can lead us away from 'the dominating, organising life of the intellect,' and only the heart – not the intellect – 'can properly respond, because the heart does not seek to control, only to enjoy, and so is mobile, flexible, sensitive to all the bewildering diversity of the world.' Like Gregory, Augustine writes about the never-ceasing pilgrimage of the heart or spirit or mens, and there is to be 'no rest in mere self-awareness, because to know the self properly is to see it set in the midst of the vast landscape of God's workings, a landscape with no human map, trusting only to the hand of God.'

Here, 'the pattern of the cross' becomes 'the meeting place of God and humanity.' There is no easy correlation between the human and the divine, but only an in-breaking of

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78 Ibid., 77.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., 79.
81 Ibid., 80.
82 Ibid., 82.
83 Ibid., 83.
love which embraces the chaos and disorder of life and transforms it. For Williams, Augustine’s legacy is two-fold. First it is a vision of human spirituality which affirms ‘that the life of grace can include not only moral struggle and spiritual darkness, but also an awareness of the radically conditioned character of human behaviour.’ Second, it is a vision of God who is not ‘the static and solitary purity of Plotinus’ ‘One’; timeless and unchangeable as he is, Augustine’s is rather the inscrutable God who speaks out of Job’s whirlwind and makes himself known in a dying man – not ‘far above,’ but penetrating every corner, mysterious with the tragic and terrifying mysteriousness of experience and history.’

In “Language, Reality and Desire,” Williams turns his attention to Augustine’s thinking on language through a close reading of his De Doctrina. He suggests that ‘Augustine’s account of interpretation’ in this work ‘is a set of variations on a single theme, the relation of res and signum, thing and sign, reality and representation.’ Augustine, argues Williams, understands human beings as ‘engaged with the world, moving through it as subjects of will and of love, and each res (thing) operates in one of two ways upon our willing and loving.’ The first way in which a res (a thing) can be encountered is as something to be enjoyed: as a terminus of meaning and a satisfaction of desire in itself. The second is as something to be used: a signpost on the way, a taste of a banquet to come. However, for Augustine signifying is a threefold not twofold affair, involving also the subject for whom signs signify. This means that

Augustine links what he has to say about language with what he has to say about beings who ‘mean’ and about the fundamentally desirous nature of those beings – a link which is undoubtedly the most original and interesting feature of the treatise.

Here, it would seem, Augustine links language, desire and a certain mobile contingency, all fundamental to what it means to be human. Both language and desire are inherently mobile and resistant to closure or satiation.

84  Ibid., 88-89.
86  Ibid., 138.
87  Ibid., 139.
88  For a more critical and questioning engagement on Augustine’s understanding of language see The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 46-51.
For the Christian, desire, meaning and relationality finally coalesce in God and nowhere else. 'God alone is to be enjoyed in and for himself, and in respect of him all else is to be used.' We need to be careful not to misinterpret this by understanding 'use' in a utilitarian or manipulative manner, rather,

the language of *uti* is designed to warn against an attitude towards any finite person or object that terminates their meaning in their capacity to satisfy my desire, that treats them as the end of desire, conceiving my meaning in terms of them and theirs in terms of me.89

In this way contingent, created things point away from themselves, and desire never coalesces upon an object but is to be redirected through it. 'God alone is the end of desire; and that entails that there is no finality, no 'closure,' no settled or intrinsic meaning in the world we inhabit,' and we also 'are in reality still *in via*, still being formed and transformed by what we receive.'90 However, this does not leave us lost in a world of arbitrary signs and signification, as meaning finally converges on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is worth quoting Williams in full here:

The Word’s taking of flesh is not a dissolving of history as eternal truth takes over some portion of the world: it is not, says Augustine (I.xii), that God comes to a place where he was not before. Rather the incarnation manifests the essential quality of the world itself as 'sign' or trace of its maker. It instructs us once and for all that we have our identity within the shifting, mobile realm of representation, non-finality, growing and learning, because it reveals what the spiritual eye ought to perceive generally – that the whole creation is uttered and ‘meant’ by God and therefore has no meaning in itself... Only when, by the grace of Christ, we know that we live entirely in a world of signs are we set free for the restlessness that is our destiny as rational creatures.91

It is important to notice what Williams is not arguing here. We are not set free from restlessness, but set free for restlessness. Once again, revelation and truth do not lift us out of history, but cast us back into it, calling us to inhabit our contingency and temporality, never allowing us some ahistorical or abstract vantage point. This means that we are to be plunged ever deeper into a world of restless meaning, where everything is capable of opening out beyond itself into relationships and new meanings yet to be discovered. As contemporary as this might sound, it is not quite the frustrating endless deferral of

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89  “Language, Reality and Desire,” 140.
90  Ibid.
91  Ibid., 141.
meaning found in postmodernism, but rather the hard work of real meaning-making in a world generated by the *verbum* of God.

Williams follows Augustine into book II of *De Doctrina* where this thinking is applied to Scripture. Augustine understands Scripture as 'the supreme *signum* after Christ,' but once more meaning is to be wrestled out of what seems a fluid and difficult text. Noting this difficulty as a kind of training in desire in which things learned too quickly or easily are rarely valued and where the unravelling of problems is often an occasion for delight, Augustine suggests that 'learning from Scripture is a *process* – not a triumphant moment of penetration and mastery, but an extended play of invitation and exploration.'⁹² Scripture becomes a kind of parable of the Christian life itself, opened out to the contingencies of history and language, context and meaning, rather than prematurely closed off by self-evident and timeless truths. Here Williams' commentary on Augustine serves as an excellent summary of his own theological project: 'a language which indefinitely postpones fulfilment or enjoyment is appropriate to the Christian discipline of spiritual homelessness, to the character of the believing life as pilgrimage.'⁹³ Here language is seen in terms of the hard work of Christian discipleship. Despite the sense that meaning is never quite settled in this scheme, none of this leads – argues Williams – to an arbitrary play of meaning. Even though Scripture can carry an 'anarchy' of meanings, 'its exchanges and substitutions' finally 'converge on the cross.'⁹⁴

The scope of Christ’s love lies precisely in his own supremely gratuitous acceptance of the limits of history ... to look to the cross, then, to 'sign' ourselves with it, is to accept the same limits, and thus to live in hope.⁹⁵

Williams argues that it is this 'acceptance of the limits of history' that leads to Augustine's breach with Platonism. Augustine contends that material, historical, desirous beings can never rationally attend to the incorruptible and immaterial, but rather that God's initiative towards us in the incarnation means that it is 'only in the non-finality of historical relationships and historical "satisfaction," and in the consequent restlessness that keeps us active and attentive is unchanging truth to be touched.'⁹⁶ In this way Platon-
nism is ‘earthed’ in the material, and the transcendent becomes available through what is seen, touched, heard and felt.

Williams sees Augustine as linking the fluidity of language to the restless mobility of the human self, where meaning and relationality are both dynamic things. Together ‘the interweaving of fluid language and open desire’ become ‘the locus of transforming grace.’ Language and meaning are never be finally settled by some breakthrough into clear metaphysical knowledge, but rather ‘through a central metaphor to which the whole world of signs can be related,’ the sign of the cross.97 In this way Wisdom enters our world as ‘precisely mortality itself, limit, incompleteness, absence ... to affirm and then transfigure the world in which we actually live, the world of body, time and language, absence and desire.’98 There is a question to be asked of Williams here: does viewing the cross as Augustine’s interpretative key lead to a dangerous negativity in Williams’ own theology? To balance such a reading of Augustine’s De Doctrina it would be useful to engage with Michael Cameron’s Christ Meets Me Everywhere, where he argues that On Christian Teaching bequeaths ‘a golden interpretive key to the spiritually capable. That key was love (caritas),’ where ‘the reader who loves well reads well.’99 Here love – caritas – rather than the cross, provides the hermeneutical key. Perhaps in the end love is both the crucifixion and affirmation of desire?

In “Sapientia and the Trinity: Reflections on the De Trinitate,” Williams mounts a creative and compelling attack on accounts that see Augustine as articulating the self in terms of individuality and interiority. Immediately he makes it clear that our understanding of ourselves is intimately linked with our understanding of God, and will go on to argue persuasively that it is nothing less than our participation in God that enables a authentic understanding of ourselves to emerge. Williams believes that ‘the connection made between Augustine and the consciousness of “modernity” is a serious error’ and that a correct reading of his De Trinitate ‘opens up theological possibilities very different from the proto-Cartesian or proto-Kantian tendencies with which he has been

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97 Ibid., 148.
98 Ibid., 149.
It is interesting to note at this point that Marion’s *In The Self’s Place* makes a similar point using Augustine’s *Confessions*, where ‘far from pretending to be a subject supposed to know, the ego supposes that God alone knows him, himself, this ego.’

Williams argues that Augustine once more throws us back into history, contingency and temporality in his meditations on the Trinity, and this is perhaps his most significant and controversial argument. And despite Augustine’s Platonic and dualistic language, Williams insists he dismantles ‘a metaphysics of timeless spirit, rather than simply reproduces the ‘ontotheology’ of a Plotinus or Porphyry.’ Williams’ first point is that ‘we are not able to know or love ourselves “accurately” unless we know and love ourselves as known and loved by God.’ The image of God that we bear is not some abstract structure within the mind or even its own self-relatedness. Memory, understanding and will – to bear the image of God – must be activated by love and in love. Here image is beyond rationality and mere philosophy and becomes about relational encounter. As Hanby suggests, Augustine ‘ultimately denies that the “psychological analogy” as such, is constitutive of the *imago dei*.’ Or in Augustine’s own words:

> this trinity, then, of the mind is not therefore the image of God, because the mind remembers itself, and understands and loves itself; but because it can also remember, understand, and love him by whom it was made.

Instead of thought generating and sustaining its own reality, ‘for the mind to acquire *sapiencia* is for the mind to see itself sustained and embraced by this self-communicating action of God.’ Williams will go on to argue that this ‘self-communicating action’ is nothing less than the life of the Trinity.

So, far from an assertion of an autonomous self or will which can image God through its own self-reflection, Williams imagines a radically opened-out self *acted upon* by God. What some have accused Augustine of is exactly that which Augustine rejects, ‘the fan-

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101 Marion, *In the Self’s Place*, 44.

102 Williams, “*Sapiencia* and the Trinity,” 318.

103 Ibid., 319-20.


106 Williams, “*Sapiencia* and the Trinity,” 320.
tasy of being a self-subsistent agent, an abstract individuality beyond all relations. What is important here is that this image of the human mirrors the image of God found in the Trinity. If we get this right we see a God moving outward in love, get it wrong and we imagine God only in terms of an abstract individuality. It is here that anthropology and theology intertwine with creativity and nuance: instead of self-assertion and self-reflection, then, 'knowing ourselves as loved creatures is the only way of knowing ourselves truthfully.' Williams pushes this further, arguing that 'growing into the image of God ... is for us to be at home with our created selves. Far from moving into a sphere of timeless spirit, 'the image of God in us' entails 'a movement into our createdness, because that is a movement into God's own life as turned "outwards."' What is becoming clear is that relation lies at the heart of the matter, both for ourselves and for God. Williams argues that the careful reader would look in vain for an argument that our mental trinity (that of memory, understanding and will) corresponds in any way with that of the divine Trinity, and that rather we are called into relation with God through the gift of the Holy Spirit, and that God himself 'wills relation by imparting his own life.' Augustine goes on to explore what the pattern of divine life might look like and takes the reader back to Book VIII where the triad of lover, beloved and love was first explored. Williams sees Augustine's exploration in terms of 'how can we love what we do not know' (iv.6) and argues with Augustine that 'we begin to understand the trinity as we understand love ... We must be in love with loving, we must desire that there be love, in us and in others.'

This is Williams' key point: to understand ourselves as loved by God is to understand God as 'Lover, Beloved and Love.' This means that 'what should be particularly noted is that for Augustine 'God cannot be other than relational, Trinitarian ... caritas is inconceivable without relatedness.' Williams is arguing that 'the image of God' in us has a rather paradoxical character. There is an unlikeness in this image, in our knowing and loving of ourselves and God, as our knowing and loving is a 'movement into our createdness.' This is because we can only know God's loving wisdom as it comes to us as

107 Ibid.
108 Ibid., 320-21.
109 Ibid., 321.
110 Ibid., 322.
111 Ibid., 325.
112 Ibid., 326.
‘freely generative grace.’ What God is, we receive. We come to know and participate in this divine wisdom only ‘to the extent that our own self-perception is a perception of our own absolute dependence on the self-giving of that wisdom.’  Once again there can be no escape to an abstract or timeless vision of the self, but only a recognition of our created distance from God. To gain a true understanding of ourselves we must ‘perceive ourselves as timebound, limited and vulnerable, as being in need of grace, not as self-generating.’ What is fragmentary, temporal and contingent in us is precisely that which can image God in us in the need to be loved and known by God.

It is to the Spirit that Augustine turns as he begins to explore how we are drawn into the trinitarian life, the Spirit as ‘agent of our transformation and of participation in the life of God.’ Here,

> the contemplative vision of Father and Son that is the work and the identity of Spirit (God’s love loving the love of God) is worked, realised, in creatures, as they are drawn out of their distance from divine love to share the relation between Father and Son, and so themselves to live in the bond of caritas with each other – the bond of love which is the life of the Church, the *communio sancti spiritus.*

This movement is mirrored in the inner life of the trinity, but with an ‘absolute simultaneity of the trinitarian relations,’ where the Father is God ‘by being for the Son,’ the Son is God by ‘being from the Father,’ and the Spirit is God ‘by being from or through the Father and the Son, divine love in search of an object.’ Williams suggests that far from Augustine dealing inadequately with the Spirit, he ‘succeeds for the first time in the history of Christian doctrine in giving some account of how and why the Spirit is intrinsic to the trinitarian life.’ As the active love between Father and Son, and the active love that pours itself into creation and the Church, it is the Spirit that enables

> a differentiation and self-reflexivity within one loving movement, which is also more than ‘self-reflexivity’ in the ordinary sense because it is, though complete in itself, also indeterminately in search of an object to love, and thus both sufficient to itself and productive.

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113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
115 Ibid., 327.
116 Ibid., 328-29.
117 Ibid., 328.
118 Ibid., 331.
Williams detects in Augustine's theology a move away from a conception of autonomy and individualism both in his theological language about humanity and God. Indeed, the self cannot be known adequately, apart from its relation to God, can only be understood authentically as known and loved by God. The dynamics of relationship lie at the heart of meaning, both theologically and anthropologically.

Milbank and Augustine: The Sociality of the Self

In Theology and Social Theory Milbank pits Augustine's City of God against Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals. This is, as Lash argues, one of his most creative suggestions.¹¹⁹ As I have already shown in chapter one, Milbank regards the nihilism of Nietzsche to be the mythos by which the contemporary self lives (or at least the most honest expression of it). But if Nietzsche can only imagine difference in terms of conflict, it is to Augustine that Milbank turns in order to retrieve difference as peace. But more than this, Augustine 'decodes' narratives of conflict and contrasts them with a narrative of peace, the non-violent interruption of The City of God in history. Indeed, Augustine sets about to deconstruct antique political society, arguing that 'its virtue is not virtue, its community not community, its justice not justice.'¹²⁰ Milbank argues that what Augustine demonstrates in The City of God is that the very assertion that human social and political life is 'a regulation of power by power' is itself part of a particular mythos, a particular social imaginary, one of a distinctly pagan kind. Hence Augustine's tale of two cities. For Milbank, 'it is in fact the ontological priority of peace over conflict ... that is the principle undergirding Augustine's critique,' but Augustine's prioritising of peace is not based on reason, but rather his fidelity to 'a narrative, a practice.'¹²¹ This Augustinian prioritising of peace is a central focus of Milbank's theological narrative.

Milbank points out that the contrast between 'ontological antagonism' and 'ontological peace' is articulated in terms of the historical narratives of the two cities. Milbank succeeds in weaving together the complex threads of Augustine's argument. The earthly city is marked by sin, a denial of the God-ward movement of human life, and the affir-

¹²¹ Ibid., 390.
mation of self-love and self-assertion. More than this, it is marked by ‘an enjoyment of arbitrary, and therefore violent power over others – the libido dominandi.’ In his sharp critique of Roman society – all the time viewing it as an exemplar of pagan society – Augustine constantly argues that societal structures of dominium – of self-governance, economic ownership, and political rule – are not orientated to the ends of justice and virtue, but rather pursue dominium as an end in itself. For Augustine, ‘the peace of Rome ... is only an apparent one, because it is but an arbitrary limitation of a preceding state of anarchic conflict.’ Augustine sees this suppressive nature of Roman dominium played out on the three stages of Roman life: on the international scene, where the unjustifiability of Roman rule is highlighted; in the oikos, where the householder can do what he likes with what he owns; and in the polis, with the inhuman treatment of the people by the aristocracy.

Such dominium is endemic to the Roman system, argues Augustine, as it is ‘so deeply inscribed at the level of myth and ritual,’ and, it is only there – at the level of mythos – that real change is possible. This is no easy matter as in Rome, like every pagan society, ‘mythical beginnings of legal order ... are traced back to the arbitrary limitation of violence by violence, to victory over rivals, and to the usurpation of fathers by sons.’ But this is not the only mythos available, for ‘this Roman world has been interrupted by another beginning, and another continuity’ in which there is nothing but ‘the vision of peace.’ This is the heavenly city where peace and justice are never about the restraining of violence but rather an embedded in harmonious difference. This city belongs to another mythos, the giftedness of Trinitarian life and the divine love made available in the incarnation. I will return to this theme of Augustine’s in a later chapter, but for now I need to expand further on Milbank’s treatment of Augustine, society and interiority to show how the self orientates itself in its world.

Arguing against interpretations of Augustine that see him as kind of proto-liberal – where the state is imagined as ‘a compromise between individual wills’ – or

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122 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid., 391.
125 Ibid.
126 see chapter 4.
proto-Protestant – where the church is reduced to ‘a collection of elect true believers known only to God’, Milbank wants to stress the societal aspect of Augustine’s thought. In *The City of God*, Augustine questions Scipio’s definition of a *res publica* as ‘an association united through a common sense of right and a unity of interest,’ and instead proposes an alternative: ‘the association of a multitude of rational beings united by a common agreement on the common objects of their love.’

Milbank correctly senses that for Augustine it is the *direction of desire* that is a key factor in determining the health of a society. For Augustine all societies require an object of worship in order for them to come together, but, as always, it is where this object of desire is located that is decisive. In his critique of Roman society, Augustine shows that what it desires more than anything else is ‘the pursuit of individual *dominium*, honour and glory.’ Augustine therefore attacks Roman society precisely for its rampant individualism. For Milbank, ‘it is clear, then, that Augustine does not endorse, indeed utterly condemns, every tendency towards a view of personhood as ‘self-ownership,’ and of ownership itself as unrestricted freedom within one’s own domain.’ So much for Augustine as a proto-liberal.

In the second place, Milbank argues that Augustine rejects individualism in the church also. Indeed, ‘the life of the saints is inherently social, because it is the opposite of the life of sin, which is the life of self-love.’ Beyond ‘the political’ (the sphere of human life governed by the suppression of violence by violence) there is ‘the social,’ and Milbank triumphantly links this sociality with the church, arguing that ‘true society implies absolute consensus, agreement in desire, and entire harmony amongst its members,’ and even more worryingly ‘and this is exactly ... what the Church provides.’ Despite an overly realised eschatology regarding the Church here, the articulation that true belief for Augustine is not to be ‘inscrutably locked within interiority,’ but rather is to be located in the church’s sacramental and social practice is a good one. Milbank correctly suggests that the Platonic antimony between *polis* and *psyche*, city and soul, can be overcome in Augustine who conceives ‘the goal of the soul as itself a social goal.’

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127 quoted in Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 400.
128 Ibid., 401.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid., 402.
131 Ibid.
authentic Augustinian, a true state of inwardness does not lift one ecstatically out of society, but rather ‘propels one further into relationship both with God and the saints in heaven and on earth.’\(^{132}\) Or as Williams states, for Augustine, ‘the *pax* of the individual soul and the *pax* of the universe are part of a single continuum.’\(^{133}\)

Milbank extends his engagement with Augustine in his “Sacred Triads: Augustine and the Indo-European Soul” where he considers Augustine’s work on the Trinity. Augustine begins, Milbank argues, ‘by *radicalizing* a stress that we only have participatory access to the eternal by *remaining within* the structures of space, time and human language.’\(^{134}\) Milbank, much like Williams, sees that for Augustine the central analogical term for understanding the Trinity is love rather than soul, and that Augustine discerns that the pattern of love is itself triune: lover, beloved and the love that flows between them. This analogy is relational rather than psychic or political. It is true that Augustine goes on to write of the soul that it remembers, knows and loves itself as ‘the most exact image of God,’ and yet, argues Milbank, this is the opposite of ‘a solipsistic interiority,’ because for Augustine to know oneself is to know oneself as loving and being loved, as always already being in relation. ‘Hence not interiority but radical *exteriorization* is implied.’\(^{135}\)

The soul, imagined by Augustine as ‘memory,’ ‘word,’ and ‘love’ is not simply interior as it is always memory of another, always signifies another, and always loves another.

In sharp disagreement with Charles Taylor,\(^{136}\) Milbank correctly argues that ‘Augustine’s use of the vocabulary of ‘inwardness’ is not at all a deepening of Platonic interiority, but something much more like its subversion.’\(^{137}\) Milbank illustrates this by noting Augustine’s double emphasis on the self’s createdness and on its temporality. For Augustine the movement inward first stresses a movement into our createdness, it is never simply a movement into an abstract interior part of ourselves. Augustine – like the Cappadocians before him – stresses the distance between God as uncreated and the self as

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132 Ibid., 404.
135 Ibid., 465.
created. And this means that we are never to strive to become something we are not. Intimately linked to this is that this movement inward is also a journey in and through time. As Milbank writes, this is a 'travelling to God by gathering ourselves again through memory, through a tearful shedding of ourselves and an expectation governed by right desire.'\textsuperscript{138} This is the dynamic interplay of past, present and future in the continuities and dislocations of the self. It is significant that Milbank highlights that this 'descent' into time is itself only a non-identical repetition of the divine descent into the darkness of sin in the Incarnation.\textsuperscript{139} The closest analogy of Trinitarian life is not therefore the 'hermetically-sealed soul,' but rather the 'ecstatic inter-involvement between past, present and future.'\textsuperscript{140}

Even as Williams and Milbank both focus on the sociality of the self in Augustine, Williams stresses the fragility of the self's constructions whereas Milbank concentrates on Augustine's development of an alternative social ontology of peace. The self is to be mobilised by the alien demands of divine love, and is to be articulated in a context of peaceful donation and Trinitarian harmony rather than conflictual violence. Once again the self can only be discovered as gift, but always this giftedness of the self can only be discovered as the self is thrown back into a history, language and sociality that is not its own. The self's constructions require the hard work of love as the political is slowly reshaped into the social and the will is reshaped by the patterns of Trinitarian love.

### Re-reading Pseudo-Dionysius

In her introduction to the thought of Dionysius, Sarah Coakley emphasises its unique blend of neo-Platonism and Christianity: its ontology of an ecstatic intermingling of divine and human 'eros,' its vision of a 'hierarchical' cosmos conjoining the angelic as well as the human; its ecclesiastical anchoring in acts of liturgical praise; and its alluring invitation to an unspeakable 'union' with the divine by means of 'mystical contemplation.'\textsuperscript{141}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 466.
  \item \textsuperscript{141} Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang, \textit{Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite} (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 2.
\end{itemize}
All of which are highly significant for our purposes. Whereas Williams desires to ‘de-Platonize’ Dionysius, and Perl wishes to ‘re-Platonise’ him at the expense of his Christianity, I will explore Milbank’s generation of an ‘alternative mythos’ that is in some ways a ‘re-imagining of the “original” encounter of Christianity with Platonism.’

Milbank believes that such an understanding can pierce through the mutual suspicion of Eastern and Western traditions, a suspicion often couched in terms of each being ‘too Platonic.’ Here ‘the Eastern tradition’ attacks ‘the West’ for being overly individualistic and intellectual, or else ‘the West’ attacks ‘the East’ for its emphasis on participation and deification. It is Milbank’s contention that this mutual suspicion is less than helpful and his approach is rather to re-Platonise Christianity from its roots, and activity he hopes will draw both East and West together in a new creative synthesis. In engaging with Dionysius’ vision of a ‘hierarchical’ cosmos, I will ask whether this is simply a static articulation of an ontotheology that betrays its own patriarchy, or whether it can be imagined as ‘a bacchic revel whose members ecstatically share in divinity.’ Exploring his liturgical and ecclesial focus, I will stress the significance of a theological language that orients itself to God doxologically rather than seeks to capture him epistemologically in which God can only be known in the ecclesial community of reciprocity and gift, a community that is in some sense the sacramental re-making of the world.

**Williams and Pseudo-Dionysius: Static Iconography or Dynamic Relationality?**

In *The Wound of Knowledge*, Williams – referencing Pseudo-Dionysius – argues that ‘God is never known independently of his loving will to give himself to human beings: there can be no neutral, ‘uninvolved’ talk of God, no definitions from a distance.’ Williams notes that Dionysius’ writings draw on the rich veins of the Cappadocian Fathers and the writings of Proclus, and here we can note again some of the themes in which we have already engaged: the infinity of desire, the stripping of the autonomy of the ‘noetic’ in the

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142 Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 121.
144 Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider, eds., *Encounter between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World through the Word* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 15.
145 Ibid., 157.
146 Perl, *Theophany*, 80.
147 Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 118.
soul’s journey into darkness, and the transformative modes of ‘active receptivity’ in Gregory; and the cosmos as theophany and the significance of *methexis* in Proclus. Williams nevertheless exposes what are for him two Dionysian faults. First, agreeing with Meyendorff, he suggests that Dionysius’ hierarchy ‘reduces the whole sacramental life of the Church to a system for individual enlightenment.’\(^{148}\) And second, he argues with Alain Riou, that he presents a ‘static, iconic picture’ that runs the risk of excluding ‘initiative, divine and human, from the order of things.’\(^{149}\) And so two dangers are highlighted in Dionysius: the abuses of hierarchy and the stasis of the iconographic.

Despite this, Williams writes of an ‘important element’ in Dionysius where he re-uses the Ignatian phrase ‘my *eros* is crucified,’ and maintains that this divine *eros*, this longing, is fundamental to all we say of God.\(^{150}\) Just as we yearn for God, so he eternally yearns to give himself and to be loved. Indeed, for Dionysius,

> God comes out of his selfhood in a kind of *ecstasy* (*ekstasis*, literally, a ‘standing outside’) when he creates; and his ecstasy is designed to call forth the ecstasy of human beings, responding to him in selfless love, belonging to him and not to themselves. Thus in the created order there is a perpetual circle of divine and human love, *eros* and *ecstasy*.\(^{151}\)

Dionysius places at the heart of Christian thinking about God, ‘the divine passion to love and to be loved.’\(^{152}\) There are striking similarities with Augustine where ‘if you see love, you see the Trinity.’\(^{153}\) It is my contention that this emphasis on ecstasy, *eros* and divine passion, far from settling into a static and individualistic system, generates a dynamically mobile and relational vision of God, the self and the cosmos. More than this, the startling image of crucified love understands that the divine longing itself is encountered in apophatic darkness and loss, but that somehow this apophasis is the fullness of divine plenitude, and could itself be a summary of Williams’ own theology. This ‘fecund and complex vision … demands a far more multi-layered view of reality and of the place of the human within it’\(^{154}\) than Williams at first seems to allow. As Balthasar puts it, this

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148 Ibid., 120.
149 Ibid., 123.
150 Ibid., 121.
151 Ibid.
152 Ibid.
154 in Coakley and Stang, *Re-Thinking Dionysius*. 
is a vision 'not of a cosmos frozen into some kind of Byzantine icon so much as a life that generatively streams and pulsates.'\textsuperscript{155}

**Milbank: Dionysius and the Theurgic and Hierarchical Self**

Milbank draws on the work of Pseudo-Dionysius in order to 'answer' some very contemporary concerns. He states that

\begin{quote}
when we contingently but authentically make things and reshape ourselves through time, we are not estranged from the eternal, but enter further into its recesses by what for us is the only possible route.\textsuperscript{156}
\end{quote}

It is a vision of a humanity on the move, shaping its material world and through that shaping coming to know its truth, a paradoxical vision where through our very contingency we are drawn into the life of the eternal. As we saw in chapter one, whereas modernity has stressed 'that nature is a dynamic process, and that human nature is most of all dynamic and creative in character,' this has led only to the dangerous view that 'human creativity possesses a seemingly unlimited and potentially catastrophic power to transform non-human nature.'\textsuperscript{157} But it is to the Neoplatonic theurgic tradition – mediated through Iamblichus, Proclus and most fully articulated in the mystical writings of Pseudo-Dionysius – that Milbank looks for a solution.

To understand Pseudo-Dionysius, we first need to engage with the Neoplatonic world in which he writes. Plotinus is known as the first of the Neoplatonists. His *Enneads* present us with a highly structured and rational system, developed in light of the transcendent One and the unity of all things in virtue of the One. Like Plato before him, Plotinus understands the mystical ascent of the soul not so much as a literal journey upwards, but rather as a movement inwards. As the soul ascends to the One, it enters more and more deeply into itself; to find the One is to find itself.\textsuperscript{158} It is significant here to notice that this ascent is also a move away from the sensible and the material and into the abstract and the intellectual, and so for Plotinus, contemplation and mystical union


\textsuperscript{157} in Pabst and Schneider, *Encounter between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy*, 48.

are famously characterised as the ‘flight of the alone to the Alone.’ Iamblichus provides a striking contrast to this Plotinian thinking. Writing later than Plotinus and in response to the perceived threat of Christianity, Iamblichus develops a theurgic form of Neoplatonism. Whereas in Plotinus the human soul never fully descends into the body and so remains to some degree eternal and perfectible, for Iamblichus the soul fully descends into the body and so rational thought alone is unable to make its ascent possible. As Iamblichus himself writes,

> it is not pure thought that unites theurgists to the gods. Indeed, what then would hinder those who are theoretical philosophers from enjoying a theurgic union with the gods? But the situation is not so: it is the accomplishment of acts ... and the power of unutterable symbols ... that establishes theurgic union.\(^{159}\)

Even though Iamblichus’ theurgic understanding is a new departure in the Greek philosophical tradition, Louth cautions us against dismissing his writings ‘as a farrago of magical nonsense,’\(^{160}\) encouraging us instead to see it as utilising ritual action and material symbol as those things that can attune humanity to the reality of the divine.

Iamblichus believed that Plato’s *Timaeus* provided a cosmology that spoke of the sanctity of the world and its transparency to the divine; a cosmology that was being threatened by Plotinus who had instead elevated human reason beyond its appointed bounds. Instead of mere ‘theology,’ or discourse about the gods, Iamblichus presented ‘theurgy,’ a work capable of transfiguring the material and the human into the divine. Arguing for a return to the Egyptian wisdom of the ancients, Iamblichus saw theurgy as a ‘sharing in the activity of creation,’ where ‘the theurgist would participate in the ordering of matter’ itself, restoring the whole cosmos to divine order.\(^{161}\) Instead of an escape from the material, theurgic Platonism embraced matter as ‘the receptacle of the divine,’ generating rituals that transformed matter and enlightened the soul. Milbank argues that ‘here philosophy finds its apex not in a disembodied “reason” but in a cultic participation


in the divine works."\textsuperscript{162} It is this theurgic aspect to Iamblican thought that Dionysius re-shapes into a dynamic sacramentality.

Milbank argues that Dionysius transmutes the \textit{theurgic} into the liturgical and sacramental activity of the Church. It is the ecclesia

which finally understands the ascent of the human soul to God, not so much as a mere ascent of the soul, but rather as a paradoxical ascent of the soul rooted in the Incarnate descent of God from heaven relived and participated in Christian liturgy, which insofar as it is a ‘work-of-the-people’ is finally and most truly a grace imbued by the power and action of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{163}

Borrowing from Plato, he uses the term \textit{methexis} which has its roots both in ancient theatre and ancient philosophy, first as a theatrical moment where the audience themselves are brought into the drama through a moment of creative improvisation, and second in philosophical thought where a particular reality participates in the deeper reality which gives it shape and form. This \textit{methexis} – a dramatic participation and liturgical performance – means that ‘matter is pregnant with power to communicate what is most radically beyond matter.’\textsuperscript{164} Through the ‘higher magic’ of theurgy, ‘we can become God, because God is constantly becoming us.’\textsuperscript{165} Dionysius’ ecclesial and celestial hierarchies are not just static and iconic images of each other, rather they participate in dramatic performances of each other in a porosity of relationship.

This is a vision of a humanity orientated to the divine in its very materiality. Knowledge is no longer simply \textit{theoria}, the abstract workings of the intellect, but now a certain cultural shaping that takes place, what might be termed the priority of the liturgical.

In coming to know by working, we arrive at a new vision through the images we have made, the songs we have sung, the words we have uttered, and this ‘seeing through’ is the theurgic invocation of the divine by which alone God can descend to us – the infusion of our own works with his inspiration.\textsuperscript{166}

Or in Balthasar’s words, a Dionysian vision emerges that sees ‘existence as liturgical event, as adoration, as celebratory service, as hidden but holy dance.’\textsuperscript{167} As Milbank argues in a discussion of Bulgakov’s theological writings, we ‘must now more fully grasp

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{162} Milbank in \textit{ibid.}, vii.
\item \textsuperscript{163} Ibid., viii.
\item \textsuperscript{164} Ibid., xiv.
\item \textsuperscript{165} Pabst and Schneider, \textit{Encounter between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy}, 78.
\item \textsuperscript{166} In \textit{ibid.}, 66.
\item \textsuperscript{167} Balthasar, \textit{Cosmic Liturgy}, 60.
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\end{flushright}
that the theological is always also theurgic: that God only reaches us through the litur-
gical invocations latent in all human creative bringing forth of the unanticipated. By
adding ‘theurgy to theosis,’ we can, ‘with this ancient resource,’ do more justice to ‘the
modern sense of the importance of human fabrication,’

the synergic fusion of human and divine work which is brought about through the
Incarnation and Pentecost and sustained by liturgical activity, focused upon the
transformation of bread and wine into God’s body in the Eucharist.

It is important to stress that this is not about the magical manipulation or technological
control of the world or its resources, but rather the liturgical and sacramental shaping of
it through prayer and praise. Even for the pagan theurgists like Iamblichus,

the theurgic rites do not change the minds of the gods, or even bring us into the relation
of seeing the gods, but rather bring us close to the divine presence through procedures
that allow us to resonate with it.

But it is Dionysius who sees that the liturgical act is only made possible through the
descent of Christ in the incarnation, ‘where God himself has descended in person to
offer worship to God and so to re-attune all of humanity to its divine origin and goal.’
This means that ‘deification is active and liturgically creative as well as contemplatively
passive,’ with ‘the ascent of deification’ remaining impossible ‘unless God constantly de-
cends to us – meeting liturgically with our acts in time, which are our modes of being
in time.’ From Dionysius Milbank learns the centrality of liturgy. Now God is primar-
ily known not through rational thought alone, but rather in embodied encounter. A
‘participation in God’s own shaping work’ Plotinus, it seems, has been turned on his
head and the ascent is now characterised not by a movement inward, but a movement
outward, an ascent that has been made possible only by a previous descent of the Word-
made-Flesh.

It is Pseudo-Dionysius himself who coined the term ‘hierarchy’ and he gives us its first
definition: ‘a sacred order, a state of understanding, and an activity approximating as

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169 In ibid., 66.
170 In ibid., 75.
171 In ibid., 78.
closely as possible the divine.”[^173] Straight away we can note its double aspect: it is at once a sacred order, an iconic system of meaning; but it is also an activity, a dynamic relationality which constantly moves and breathes. Louth sees in this Dionysian hierarchy, “a sense of community which turns the manifold variety of the created order from “a realm of unlikeness,” in which we are cut off from one another and from God, into an infinitely sensitive manifestation of God.”[^174]

Coakley contends that the Dionysian understanding of the divine as continuing flow of *ekstasis* and return, can lead to a re-imagining of hierarchy, where instead of a ‘patriarchal “top-down” hierarchy and abuse of male power’ a more nuanced, circular understanding can be formed where the whole transcends the sum of the parts.[^175] Indeed it would be wrong to imagine God as the first and highest being in the order of the cosmos, for God ‘does not stand at the top of the universal hierarchy but transcends and permeates the whole.’[^176] The universe of which the human self is a part is a network of relationships, each of which refracts the light of divine meaning and significance. This is a rich metaphysical vision where the sacred order always seems to be layered in threes: the cosmological as spiritual, ecclesiastical and material; the ecclesiastical as diaconal, priestly and episcopal; the sacramental as baptismal, Eucharistic and chrismatic; prayer as purification, contemplation and union; and the soul as appetite, emotion and reason. In each level of this hierarchy there is a sense of contingency, dynamics and mobility, a circular dance of meaning and relationality. As Dionysius writes

> hierarchy causes its members to be images of God in all respects, to be clear and spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of primordial light and indeed of God himself. It ensures that when its members have received this full and divine splendour they can then pass on this light generously.[^177]

Far from this being a static vision, there is a dynamic and relational mobility at work here, a revel of cosmological reciprocity. Dionysian hierarchy, therefore, ‘has nothing to do with domination and subservience, but only with love, the love of all things for one

[^174]: In Coakley and Stang, *Re-Thinking Dionysius*, 51.
[^175]: See the argument in ibid., 315-20.
[^176]: Perl, *Theophany*, 73.
another which is the love of God in them all, what we might call 'a perpetual circle of divine and human love, eros and ecstasy.'

The sense of the hierarchical builds on the theurgic, emphasising again, the role of the liturgical in the approach to God, both making central the language of praise and entreaty as the most typical theological language ... and also suggesting that it is only in an ecclesial encounter with God that we come to know him at all.

Indeed, there is a strong sense in Dionysius that human encounter with God is not that of an individual spirituality, but a cosmological movement with the human agent at the heart. It is this stress on the radical interconnectedness of God and all things that finally exposes the myth of the solitary mystic turned away from the world and towards himself. Milbank contends that the Dionysian hierarchy breaks down the binary oppositions of exteriority and interiority, mystical and political in the priority of the liturgical. 'There are not then two parallel hierarchies, the one internal and mystical, and the other public and political,' rather 'there is but one hierarchy of the Eucharist and ecclesial corpus mysticum, which is at once mystical and political.'

Balthasar poetically celebrates Pseudo-Dionysius in almost hyperbolic terms,

his ecstatic vision of a holy universe, flowing forth, wave upon wave, from the unfathomable depths of God, whose center lies always beyond the creature's reach; his vision of a creation that realizes itself in ever more distant echoes, until it finally ebbs away at the borders of nothingness, yet which is held together, unified, and 'brought home;' step by step, through the ascending unities of an awestruck love; his vision of a world dancing in the festal celebration of liturgical adoration, a single organism made up of inviolable ranks of heavenly spirits and ecclesial offices, all circling round the brilliant darkness of the central mystery – aware of the unspeakable nearness of their Source in all its radiant generosity, yet equally aware of the ever-greater distance of the 'superessential,' 'super-inconceivable' One: this vision of reality, with something both intoxicating and religiously sober in its sacred, liturgical rhythm, could be found in such purity neither in Alexandria nor in Cappadocia, let alone in the austere deserts of Egypt or the earthy classrooms of Antioch!

In my considerations of Pseudo-Dionysius, I have subtly shifted our focus from the self to the context in which the self lives, moves and has its being. Indeed, we have noted that the self only comes to be in its relation to the liturgical, ecclesiological and cosmological,

178 Perl, Theophany, 77.
179 Williams, The Wound of Knowledge, 121.
180 In Coakley and Stang, Re-Thinking Dionysius, 57-58.
181 Milbank, Being Reconciled, 107.
182 Balthasar, Cosmic Liturgy, 58.
in its dynamic circling in hierarchical engagement with others. More than this, the self is re-attuned to this cosmos through its _theurgic_ actions; its contemplative and sacramental transformations of itself and its world.

**Conclusion**

I argued at the start of this chapter that Williams and Milbank are not primarily interested in the historical retrieval of tradition for its own sake, but that both utilise traditional voices in order to make new articulations and imaginations of the self possible today. Where contemporary narratives of the self begin to celebrate difference, they can only generate contexts of suspicion, fragmentation and conflict as the self is enclosed in a stifling finitude. Creative dialogues between Williams and Milbank with Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius allow a new language of the self to emerge. With Gregory the self is affirmed in its mobility as desire sets it in motion towards the other. Desire is not born of lack, but is endlessly expansive as it begins to taste the infinite God towards which it tends. As the soul is drawn upwards, its orientation moves from inwards to outwards in an embrace of the ecclesial and the social. The trajectory of the soul is reconfigured as the trajectory of gift, the endless movements of desire. With Augustine a radical sense of exile and homelessness is sustained and yet enfolded by a deeper narrative of loving donation. Here the very fractures and dislocations of the self are further wounded and yet transfigured by the kenotic movements of divine love. With Augustine a contrary narrative of the social is also made possible. Beyond the violence of the political lies the peaceful harmony of the social. And with Pseudo-Dionysius we have encountered the _theurgic_, where the self is imagined beyond the wilful assertions of its own violent and arbitrary shaping of its world. God is now to be glimpsed through a collective, cultural vision that sacramentally re-enchants the cosmos.

Two trajectories need to be taken forward in the next chapter. First it has become clear that Milbank’s and Williams’ focus on _epektasis_ in Gregory stresses the move from the interior to ‘the whole history of human growth’\(^{183}\) where both body and society become

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‘a site of pure activity.’\textsuperscript{184} This new emphasis on history, language and sociality needs to be fully explored in terms of both cost and gift. A similar emphasis on shared sociality in Augustine, this time coupled with the dangers of fragmentation and misrecognition need to be brought out also. It is to Hegel that I will turn to show that the self can be honestly articulated only ‘by relating it to our life as embodied and social beings,’\textsuperscript{185} and to explore whether a real sense of relationality can be preserved between the self and the other that doesn’t finally dissolve into antagonism or absorption. In Pseudo-Dionysius’ writing theurgy draws culture into a new participatory framework with the divine, and so a full exploration of this new emphasis on cultural-making is also needed. It is with Vico that such an exploration becomes possible. His is ‘a poetic philosophy, a translation of knowledge into activity or making.’\textsuperscript{186} Can the self be articulated through its poetic construals and artistic making? It is to such matters that I now turn.

\textsuperscript{184} Milbank, \textit{The Word Made Strange}, 208.
Re-Imagining the Self II: Modernity Contested

In *Borrowed Light*, Timothy Brennan argues that ‘no philosopher ... exceeds Vico’s and Hegel’s fascination with the human being as actor ... for both, the human is the being beyond which we cannot think.’ Williams and Milbank find in Hegel and Vico respectively a new emphasis on the self’s encounter with history, language and sociality. Hegel extends Williams’ Augustinianism this time in terms of the fractured and exiled self only finding a ‘home’ in the mis-recognitions and endless negotiations of a conflictual society. In a similar way, Vico ‘completes’ Milbank’s post-modern Augustinian move: now human cultural-making participates in the creative generation of the *Logos* just as a *poiesis* that conceives difference as peace deconstructs the pagan violence of modernity. If there are differences in their trajectories – particularly in the role of tragedy and their respective stress on loss or excess – they converge in the way that both argue that the universal (Hegel’s ‘absolute knowledge’ or Vico’s ‘New Science’) can only be known through a renewed emphasis on the particular: on language, identity and temporality.

In this chapter I will follow a thematic trajectory rather than a chronological one. Hegel will be explored first as his understanding of human sociality strikes a more *kenotic* note where the self is primarily to be found through a certain sense of loss and estrangement as static, abstract models are re-cast in terms of costly encounter and shared embodiment. Identity is fully articulated as constructed and therefore limited and historically and socially bounded. In this section Milbank’s interrogation of Hegel and specifically his questioning of the tragic will be given full voice, as will Williams’ ‘answer’ to this

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question. In the second section Vico will be introduced, as another writer unwilling to think the self but in terms of culture, language and shared history. I will nevertheless note a different emphasis in which cultural making is seen as central, an ascent of the self in dynamic anticipation of God’s own creative impulse. Now the self is to be known in its poetic and artistic activity, as it shapes and is shaped by culture and as a new poetic language beyond conflict begins to be articulated: the language of gift. In this second section Milbank’s Vichian construction of a new sociality will come under attack by its fiercest Hegelian critic, Gillian Rose. Is Milbank’s articulation of a social self nothing but a utopian fantasy that far from embedding the self in a mobile and conflictual sociality only offers an escape from it? A consideration of Milbank’s poetic constructions of sociality, this time in terms of ‘Gothic Space’ will suggest a different answer.

In the final section I will consider whether Hegel’s narrative of the self as ‘a continual psycho-social death and resurrection,’ the kenotic movement of dispossession and endless negotiation, finally needs to be supplanted by a Vichian understanding that locates the ascent of the self into the divine in its own creative and poetic making. Or else can these two narratives be held in tension in an understanding of the self in all its social and cultural embodiment, an embodiment that is paradoxically both limit and gift?

Williams and Hegel: The Self, Dialectic and Dispossession

Williams’ writing can, in many ways, be described as ‘thinking with Hegel.’ Hegel is so important to Williams as he stresses that ‘thinking’ – the hard work of rational engagement – is always the thinking of this particular subject with this particular language and history. Thinking is a discovery, not a recovery of a priori essences or static images of an unchanging self and its world. Hegel posits a self that is constantly on the move as constant interrogations of partial understandings require its constant dismantling and reconstruction in its confrontations with the limits and possibilities of its embodied sociality. The self emerges as a dynamic process, but more than this, as an ascetical process of loss and discovery. I shall chart Williams’ engagement with Hegel in terms of:

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Hegel and the Post-modern Self

In "Hegel and the gods of postmodernity," Rowan Williams invokes Hegel to move beyond the postmodern fixation with difference and imagine the self as relational. Instead of prioritising and sacralising a certain absence, Hegel’s ‘negative theology’ is more about the dispossession of the self as it reaches beyond to encounter the other. Williams begins with a critique of Derrida who argues that language as endless play upsets any sense of presence or meaning as stable or total and transmutes identity into difference. Williams suggests that the ‘fear expressed is of totalization: all negotiation moves inexorably towards identity, all exchange presupposes an attainable sameness or equivalence.’ But he argues that there is a misfire here for the liberation needed is ‘not from a global illusion about linguistic exchange,’ as such, but rather ‘from whatever conditions hinder the movement to a jointly accepted mode of continuing.’ For Williams, language is never the play of endless meanings floating free of reality but rather the hard work of human encounter and meaning-making. In such a context there is no end of negotiation, rather a mode of continuing the conversation where each new position needs to be located in a history of exchange. It is only when we believe our positions have no past and no process of construction – if they are imagined as static and irrefutable facts about the world – that the real problems begin to emerge.

4 For an excellent introduction to Williams and Hegel see Matheson Russell, "Dispossession and Negotiation: Rowan Williams on Hegel and Political Theology," in On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays, ed. Matheson Russell (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009); Andrew Shank's rendition of Hegel is also significant for Williams, see Andrew Shanks, Hegel's Political Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Another decisive influence on Williams' reading of Hegel is Gillian Rose, see particularly Gillian Rose, Hegel Contra Sociology (London: Athlone, 1995).
5 Rowan Williams, Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 28.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
It is at this point, Williams argues, that Hegel comes into his own precisely because his dialectical view enables us to think difference and relationality properly. Hegel’s dialectical approach is ‘emphatically not a story of return to the same.’

Williams highlights two aspects to Hegel’s approach that can take us beyond the postmodern fixation on simple difference. First, ‘Hegel’s dialectic is meant to challenge the all-sufficiency of the polarity of simple identity and simple difference’ where such oppositions are overcome by thinking that struggles to articulate a certain wholeness that transcends apparent contradictions. Or as Hegel writes,

> Spirit is not an inert being, but on the contrary, absolutely restless being, pure activity, the negating or ideality of every fixed category of the abstract intellect ... not an essence that is already finished and complete before its manifestation, hiding itself behind its appearances, but an essence which is truly actual only through determinate forms of its necessary self-manifestation.

Second, Hegel’s dialectical understanding is about ‘becoming,’ where ‘time and understanding belong together’ and where ‘language constantly remakes itself in the fact of what is not yet understood,’ and ‘criticizes itself unceasingly.’ The world can always mean more and the self’s articulation is constantly deepening and evolving.

It is here that Williams teases out the meaning of God in Hegel, arguing that Hegel’s understanding of God is bound up with the making of sense. God is that which makes articulation of the world possible. Once more Williams emphasises the significance of time and understanding in which understanding emerges over time through negation, negotiation, dispossession and reformation. If God is ‘the bringing to sense, of the world’s process,’ then making sense becomes

> the overcoming of otherness not by a reduction to identity but by the labour of discovering what understanding might be adequate to a conflictual and mobile reality without excising or devaluing its detail.

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8 Ibid., 29.
9 Ibid., 29-30.
11 Williams, Wrestling with Angels, 30.
12 Ibid.
Williams argues that a Hegelian negative theology is never the exaltation of absence – as it might be with certain ‘postmodern’ theologies – but is rather about the costly encounter with mystery and the hard work of making sense.

The Self and ‘Infinite Relatedness’

In “Logic and Spirit in Hegel,” Williams takes his conversation with Hegel further. The self always already presupposes a shared world of meaning. He argues that thinking for Hegel is ‘to enter an infinite relatedness,’ and is always already to be in the world and part of it.\(^\text{13}\) This means first, that identity is always mediated, already realised in relationship with something else; and that, second, to think is to discover an ‘other’ who is not finally in competition or rivalry, but rather is constitutive of a shared reality. For Hegel this means ‘that no otherness is unthinkable,’ for this would mean we were unable to ‘think ourselves’ as ‘we’ are only discovered in and through the other.\(^\text{14}\) However, this is not necessarily to think a totalitarian scheme, rather of thinking through a relatedness that constitutes identity itself. Hegel’s system is translated along the lines of Nancy who argues that

> the truth is total or it is nothing (and this is what the word ‘system’ means for Hegel: it is the holding together of the whole of truth), and that totality is not a global form, assignable as such and liable to be foisted upon being as well as sense, but the infinite self-relation of what is.\(^\text{15}\)

Thinking emerges as dialectic, as that which empties itself, that which denies itself in order to find itself. Williams detects a clear theology behind Hegel’s thinking here. If it is ‘Hegel’s contention all along ... that to think about thinking is to think about, or rather to think \textit{within}, an infinite relatedness, a comprehensive intelligibility,’ then this must be in some way ‘to think God and to participate in God.’\(^\text{16}\) Here we are back to God as the shape and meaning of the world’s process, ‘a reality that is determined solely as self-relatedness,’ and here, argues Williams, Hegel is not far at all from the likes of Augustine, Anselm or Aquinas. If thinking is about the discovery of ‘my identity in the alien given-

\[^{13}\text{Ibid., 36.}\]
\[^{14}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{15}\text{Nancy, \textit{Hegel}, 8-9.}\]
\[^{16}\text{Williams, \textit{Wrestling with Angels}, 38.}\]
ness of the past,’ then ‘the supreme awareness of thinking, thinking reconciliation, God, must be a historical discovery.’ As we discovered with Augustine, God is encountered not through an inward ascent of the soul, but through a painful kenosis, a descent into limit, history and the particularity of human embodied existence.

The Self of the ‘Broken Middle’

In “Between politics and metaphysics,” Williams draws together the political and metaphysical through reflecting upon language, relatedness and history. ‘Reality is seen as difficult,’ and a work of labour is required if any sense of shared space is to emerge. He asks how we are to construe difference and generate any sense of shared ‘intelligible action’ while refusing the totalitarian impulse. Hegel comes into play this time through the writings of Gillian Rose whose work is concerned with themes of otherness and the ‘recognisability of error,’ where learning becomes our ability to recognise and re-negotiate previous failures of vision and ideology. History is of major significance here as that which situates both the ‘other’ and my perceptions of them, and as that which enables provisionality, change and the transformation of both.

Drawing on Rose, Williams argues that Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* is by no means an account of the knowing subject absorbing its object in thought, but rather articulates a kind of hermeneutics of suspicion where static and complete models of the self are radically questioned and subverted. This practice of scepticism that, so far from inducing despair or withdrawal or apathy, empowers us to attempt transformative action in the clear recognition that any liberation from the distortions of ‘natural’ thinking is a necessary step to the removal of those social relations that reflect and intensify untruthful consciousness.

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17 Ibid., 41.
18 Ibid., 53.
19 This opening up of the conversation to postmodern and Wittgensteinian themes is a mark of Williams’ theological thought. See particularly “Belief and Theology: Some Core Questions,” in *God’s Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation*, ed. Rupert Shortt (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005), 16.
23 Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 60.
Hegel’s ‘way of despair’ moves from recognition to recognition, with each moment remaining only as a ‘position’ taken, still historically formed and ideologically driven and so still incomplete and ripe for transformation.\textsuperscript{24} Here ‘the system’ is not total knowledge or a God’s-eye-view, but rather the project itself: the outworking of its own negotiations and dispossessions.\textsuperscript{25} Or in Rose’s own words, this is ‘not a success, but a gamble.’\textsuperscript{26} In Rose’s reading of Hegel, risk and the violence of misrecognition emerge as necessary moments in social construction, for ‘all strategy is “agonistic,” involved in a struggle of the will against the resistance of an environment, and it becomes impossible to disentangle this from some account of violence.’\textsuperscript{27} Rose’s articulation of a ‘broken middle,’ means that to begin the process of thinking is already to be at risk, for we can never control or contain our goal from the start, but always occupy ‘an unsought and uncontrolled middle.’\textsuperscript{28} We always have to begin somewhere, and this somewhere is already historically and ideologically formed. Following Rose, Williams argues that political and religious thought become dangerous when the existing order is ‘understood as a system that has forgotten how to fail, a system that guarantees successful performance.’\textsuperscript{29} Strangely it is precisely the recognition of our ability to fail that enables us to act. Action becomes ‘not self-assertion but … self-dispossession, or even self-gift.’\textsuperscript{30}

Rose’s philosophy, like Hegel’s, draws together the political and the metaphysical arguing that it is only the establishment of a shared world that makes human action meaningful. For Williams also, neither metaphysics nor politics are about providing transcendent bases upon which to believe and act, but are rather about ‘properly leaving us stranded in history, which is where we ought to be.’\textsuperscript{31} This is so, even if this feels like a place of exile and uncertainty. Rather than abstract speculation, the ‘common ground of


\textsuperscript{25} See Nancy, \textit{Hegel}, 3-13.

\textsuperscript{26} Rose, \textit{Hegel Contra Sociology}, 159.

\textsuperscript{27} Williams, \textit{Wrestling with Angels}, 62.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 63.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 64.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 65.
politics and metaphysics,’ is ‘history as a coming to learn,’ where, ‘the act of interpreting, expressing ‘learning,’ is itself historical, strategic and without guarantee.’ This is Hegel’s fundamental insight: history is how we do our metaphysics ... Not that history as record delivers to us a map of our concept-formation ... but engagement with history lays bare for us the character of thinking as engagement, as converse, conflict, negotiation, judgment and self-judgment.

The truth of who we are requires constant loss as inadequate notions of the self are deconstructed and reconstructed in an endless kenotic movement of dislocation and relocation.

The Self and God: Contradiction or Correlation?

The Hegelian movement of estrangement and return is read by Williams as a theology of the cross which enables us to ‘read’ God in history in terms of its dislocations and breakages. He sees this Hegelian dynamic as startlingly convergent with earlier Christian traditions of inhaesio and ecstasis found in Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas. In such traditions God is known through his being-in-the-other, especially present in the contradictions and paradoxes of the world. What Milbank rejects as a tragic pagan myth, Williams celebrates as an articulation of the divine love. Indeed, Williams pushes things further, developing an understanding of the Trinity in which ‘the “ecstatic” nature of divine love exceeds the symmetry of the mutual self-dispossession of the Father and Son, in constituting a life productive of infinite otherness and reconciliation.’ It is the Spirit that carries this expression into the world, ‘as the productive historical life that issues from living-in-the-other – as the life of the subject in community.’ It is here that dialectic, theology and politics meet. For if the shape of our world – the shape of thinking itself – is a ‘living-in-the-other,’ then ‘politics is not thinkable apart from the trinitarian dogma,’ and ‘concrete freedom is unimaginable, unrealisable, if thinking revolts against the triune God, against thought as self-love and self-recovery in the other, against thought as ecstasis.’

32 Ibid., 67.  
33 Ibid.  
34 Ibid., 43.  
35 Ibid.  
36 Ibid., 44.
Anticipating two objections to this ‘Hegelian’ approach, Williams argues first that Hegel was in no way an antecedent to contemporary process theology. Controversially he argues that Hegel sees ‘spirit’ as in no way dependent upon the world, but rather that it has some objectivity, simply ‘it is what it is, identity, otherness, reconciliation.’\(^37\) Secondly, he rejects the criticism that Hegel reduces the ‘specificity of Christ to a speculative deduction.’\(^38\) Nothing of necessity in Hegel can be learnt through abstract rationalisation that is beyond history, rather necessity is what history teaches. It is the historical event of the cross that shapes the speculative moment and provides a shape to thinking itself. Thinking is a thinking of narrative – specifically the narrative of ‘incarnation’ and ‘dere- liction,’ and the marshalling of a trinitarian ‘grammar.’ Wedded to this is Williams’ desire to ‘underline Hegel’s commitment to the vision of thought as ecstatic and kenotic.’ This is nothing less than the life of God worked out in the ‘otherness’ of history, a vision that lies at the heart of Williams’ own theological project. It is worth quoting him in detail here.

Hegel’s structuring narrative is ... incarnation as understood in the Lutheran framework in which the humanity of God incarnate is not a ‘picture’ of the divine power, but the enacting of divine resource in the poverty, pain and negativity of a life and death ... Hegel assumes that what we might call the ‘interests’ of God and the reasoning subject are not alien or in competition ... [but] the union of divine and human interest must be affirmed and understood at just that point where the sheer historical vulnerability of the human is most starkly shown ... To understand the (historical) cross as God’s is to understand the negative ‘speculatively’ – the negative not as absence or mystery but as the denial of human spirituality in oppression, suffering and death.\(^39\)

Here thinking itself is only made possible by a kenotic commitment to ‘a historical life and a social practice.’\(^40\)

Williams’ argues forcefully that Hegel’s system is not to be seen as a rationally deducible or speculative model, and begins to work this out in a distinctively Hegelian account of the Church, now seen in terms of ‘God-in-relation to a historical community.’\(^41\) Williams goes on to give a new take on Hegel’s own metahistory in terms of a disinterested God articulating itself in the interests of a particular human community. But how do

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 47.
\(^{38}\) Ibid.
\(^{39}\) Ibid., 32.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., 33.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., 71.
Judaism and Christianity attempt to stand for the ‘interest’ of a God without interest? Not as a community beyond history and therefore beyond judgement, but rather as a community just as vulnerable to failure as any other, that enacts God’s ‘interest’ as a kind of dispossession. Therefore, ‘Israel’s identity becomes bound up with exile, Jesus’ identity with the cross, the Church (in some of its more primitive self-reflection) with the imagery of the “resident alien.” 42 What seems to be emerging here is the story of exile, crucifixion and loss as that of the story of God’s own life, and the story of our own.

This is not an emptying out of God without remainder into the otherness of history or contingency: what is enacted in history is the divine life, but living in its other, realising its ‘interest’ in its other. If, in simple terms, this is how God is, this is how God’s creation also is. 43

Russell helpfully draws this into a threefold movement of relation between the human subject and God: (i) ‘that the future of God and the future of the reasoning subject do not stand in contradiction but rather are confluent and compatible,’ that (ii) ‘the history of God and the history of humanity are nonetheless at each point discordant and non-coincident’ for otherwise there could be no history; and therefore (iii) ‘the most “divine” moment in human history ... is the one in which ”the sheer historical vulnerability of the human is most starkly shown, where unfinishedness, tension, the rejection of meaning and community are displayed.” 44 In all of this, ‘Hegel explicitly, and Rose more ironically and guardedly, both locate the theology of the cross ... between politics and metaphysics.’ 45 For Williams – as he reads Hegel and Rose – all of our thinking, all of our acting, is to take a cruciform shape, a shape of kenosis and dispossession, and therefore all of our ‘reality’ is to reflect God’s own self-relatedness.

Hegel and the Tragic Self

If I have shown that Williams’ theological project is Hegelian to its core, then Milbank characterises his own project as both ‘for and against Hegel.’ 46 Milbank endorses Hegel’s thought in four aspects: (i) his enfolding of philosophy with theology; (ii) his overcom-

42 Ibid., 72.
43 Ibid.
44 Russell, “Dispossession and Negotiation,” 94.
45 Williams, Wrestling with Angels, 73.
ing of the contemporary divide between politics and religion (which is Augustinian in shape in its imagining of the religious as the only authentically public); (iii) his exposure of the failure of Christian practice (Milbank also critiques the church for its failures inasmuch as it unleashed both liberalism and nihilism), and (iv) the ‘crucifixion’ of reason, as abstract thought is broken on the rock of history and incarnation interrupts and subverts its ‘triumphant’ march through history. But Milbank also identifies three Hegelian errors: ‘first of all, Hegel retains the Cartesian subject;’47 second he ‘invents a “myth of negation,”’48 and third he ‘misconstrues infinitude.’49 The first error, if read alongside my discussions on Williams and Hegel above, clearly misfires. The Hegelian subject is radically questioned through its relatedness, its historical situatedness, and the constructedness of its own identity. As Davis writes, with Hegel ‘we witness the death of mind conceived of as a Cartesian cogito,’ as mind is now reconceived only by immersing ourselves in the concrete world of human engagement and dialectical movement.50

The second and third critiques can be taken together and require a more compelling case to answer. The ‘myth of negation’ imagines that a thing can only be known through its negation, placing contradiction at the heart of existence, and even, according to Milbank, placing contradiction at the heart of God. In this way history always follows the same pattern, and this is a mythic re-narration of God’s own story as one of necessary self-alienation and recovery, an emptying out of divine being into the world in estrangement and exile which looks to a return. Milbank contends that Hegel imagines the life of God-in-the-world as a kind of ‘Prodigal Son’ tale, this time with God as the prodigal, losing himself in the world in order to find himself again. Žižek takes this narrative to its extremes, seeing God being utterly given up on the cross, this time an abandonment without return. This ‘myth of negation’ is linked by Milbank to Hegel’s construal of finitude where this finite pattern of loss and recovery (a kind of gnostic return of violence) is projected onto the infinite: a projection of violence onto the divine. It seems that there

47 Ibid., 154.
48 Ibid., 155.
49 Ibid., 157.
is some bite to Milbank’s critique here, particularly as it applies to Williams’ use of Hegel. Despite Williams’ constant refusals of mythological understandings of the Trinity, at times he can be very close to articulating this ‘myth of negation’ in his own understanding of God. In *Faith in the Public Square*, for example, he writes of God abandoning ‘the life of an isolated heaven to work out and define what divine life might mean in the conditions of a compromised and tragic world,’ and in his writing on Balthasar, he writes of a ‘self-alienation’ in the life of the Trinity that is then worked out in the life of the world.\(^{51}\) Constantly in Williams, ‘God overthrows speculative theology by making himself a *worldly* reality.’\(^{52}\) The danger here is that a certain reading of the world – as negation and self-alienation – threatens to enclose God within it.

Milbank extends his interrogation of Hegel in *The Monstrosity of Christ*. In this complex and wide-ranging work two fundamental concerns appear that are significant for my purposes. The first is a particular reading of Hegel (here given by Žižek\(^{53}\)) that essentialises a Protestant, Lutheran narrative. Here ‘Protestantism negates the Catholic negation of (Eastern) Orthodoxy’ and Hegel becomes ‘the fully fledged Protestant consummation of Christian metaphysical logic.’\(^{54}\) Milbank hotly contests such a Protestant reading of history that results in the inevitability of modernism and freezes the contingency of history. Indeed, ‘the key illusion of the Protestant metanarrative is that the mode in which modernity has occurred and the stages that is has gone through, are the necessary and only possible mode and stages.’\(^{55}\) In superb Milbankian fashion he asks, ‘must we be confined within this Protestant, Jansenist, and totalitarian gloom? Or can an alternative Catholic metanarrative be sustained?’\(^{56}\) It is here that Milbank wants to assert the radical contingency of history, an open-ended ‘Catholic historiography’ where, ‘the narrative of Christendom is the contingent story of whether or not the balance of reason with poetry has held,’ and where this ‘holding’ needs to be ‘ceaselessly re-created.’\(^{57}\)

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55 Ibid., 114.
56 Ibid., 131.
57 Ibid., 218.
The second difficulty that Milbank discerns in Hegel is that his dialectical approach emerges out of tension and conflict. What concerns him is that for Hegel 'this agonism is inscribed at the most ultimate ontological level.' Here, 'masters and slaves must be necessarily struggling against each other,' and reality remains 'instinctively conflictual.'

This seems to re-inscribe violence at the heart of meaning. There is the further danger that dialectic requires that moments of illusion and delusion are 'a necessary moment in the unfolding of truth,' and in this way violence becomes wedded to nihilism where nothingness is 'always undermining being from within and being' is 'always struggling to be born from this dark womb.' In all of this, tragic loss seems to become the motivating force of history. Once more Milbank questions the 'entirely implausible view that negation itself does all the work' in generating a genuine historical newness, doubting that the tragic has the resources to posit a new imagination or praxis. Milbank argues that an alternative vision has to be explored: 'a paradoxical perspective which cannot be reduced to the dialectical and which supports a Catholic Christian metaphysical, theological, and historical vision.'

It is to Vico that Milbank turns to provide such a vision. It is this notion of the tragic upon which Milbank and Williams utterly divide, and so the time is ripe for an exploration of the tragic self. Milbank attacks the notion of the tragic in that it represents 'speculative closure.' In Greek thought, he argues, tragedy records the 'end of history' in the founding of the polis where sacrifice and revenge are once and for all limited and yet inscribed at the heart of society as the shape and means of the political apparatus itself. The tragic, argues Milbank,

instead of striving entirely to overcome violence ... or at least hoping for its overcoming ... instead compromises with violence and dilemma and then hypostatises this compromise as inevitable.

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58 Ibid., 138.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 139.
61 Ibid., 142.
62 Ibid., 159.
64 Ibid.
If violence is the only story to be told, then history is indeed at an end and the human self can be nothing more than a passive victim of it. Following the American Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart, Milbank views the tragic as prioritising perplexity and scarcity and thus as replacing the beatific vision as the founding narrative of human identity and relationship. Milbank accuses tragic visions of the self of a certain pietistic focus upon Good Friday, a focus reluctant to anticipate a Resurrection rejoicing. Attacking Hegel’s notion of a speculative Good Friday as a pagan offering up of human suffering to a deity that requires such suffering, Milbank believes that such a vision freezes present suffering and therefore prioritises it as that which has infinite significance. Instead Milbank wants to relativise such suffering, opening it out to past security and future hope and ensuring that it never has the final word. Instead of a distortion of the finitude of time by the privative notion of evil that prioritises the immanent moment, Milbank desires to ‘read’ finitude as itself an opening into the infinite. In this way he seeks to secure the priority of the good (of freedom, security, liberation and hope – in short, of resurrection) against a tragic vision that falsely prioritises suffering and violence and so offers compromise rather than hope.

Alongside Hegel, Donald MacKinnon – another key influence on Williams – comes under fire for an undue emphasis on the tragic. Milbank suggests that MacKinnon does not simply discover history to be tragic, but rather that he ‘emplots history within a privileged tragic framework.’ But, argues Milbank, this privileging of the tragic actually represents ‘a kind of exit from the narrative’ where it is asserted that it is ‘only in tragic perplexity that we know we are free,’ only as we are ‘brought up against the very margins of the humanly possible world.’ There is therefore in MacKinnon’s writings a kind of ontologising of the site of tragic conflict, but Milbank wants instead to stress an authentically Christian perspective, one of ‘tragicomic irony rather than unappeased tragedy,’ where failure and conflict represent not their inevitability, but more ‘a lack of integration in our society, or the lack of a sufficiently encompassing social imagination.’

66 Milbank, “The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy,” 40.
67 Ibid., 41.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 22.
in society point to possible new moments of reconciliation and re-creation, rather than the end of human agency. For Milbank the tragic cannot simply be ‘the way things are,’ the natural conflicts and contradictions of antagonistically mobile selves, but rather a distortion or failure of vision that prevents the harmonious expression of difference being seen. But for Milbank this occlusion of vision can only ever be temporary, as true vision is restored by resurrection promise. In the end it seems that for Milbank the tragic imagination is a failure of vision where ‘culture is seen too much as the given,’ already constructed and ossified within the limits of conflict and failure, and ‘too little as the imagined’ where the privative elements of evil are exposed and a new language of cultural ‘making’ is made possible.71

In his chapter “Tragedy against Pessimism” in *The Tragic Imagination*, Williams engages with Milbank’s critique of MacKinnon. It seems that ‘MacKinnon’s problem is that he lacks a theory as to how non-destructive social practices may be created and maintained,’ and where individual motivation is pitted against ‘the lethal realities of the public world.’72 Williams argues that if Milbank is correct then ‘at its most extreme, this seems to imply a near-Manichaean metaphysic, a fundamental sickness or rupture in reality.’73 Williams suggests that both Milbank and Hart see tragedy as a story of the conflict between noble humans and cruel external necessity, or as a story of unrelieved human suffering and God’s identification with it.74 But, argues Williams, MacKinnon’s theology affirms much more than this, evidencing as it does two fundamental concerns. The first is that of showing that human existence is necessarily limited, and the second is to show the irreversibility of time. MacKinnon’s work does not in fact reject plot or narrative, but instead stresses ‘what it means to recognize our finitude: narrative itself presupposes the irreversible passage of time and thus the omnipresence of loss.’75 And yet, ‘to recognize this element of loss or absence is not necessarily to be committed to a picture of finite existence as a struggle between fate and the noble but helpless subject.’76 Indeed,

71 Ibid., 24.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., 111.
75 Ibid., 113.
76 Ibid., 113-14.
‘refusing to act because I cannot control interpretation and effect is a retreat from humanity itself, from its narrative and temporal character.’

As to Milbank’s suggestion that MacKinnon refuses the possibility of a ‘resolved’ plot, Williams questions whether that kind of resolution is possible or even desirable. If resolution is that which seeks to ‘cancel the tragic past’ or nullify ‘the tangles and injuries of what has been done or suffered,’ then this can only ever be ‘an unmaking of the past’ and itself a dangerous escape from the world of narrative. But if resolution speaks not of an absolute ending that cancels out all that has gone before, but rather entwines the strands of the past to make new futures possible, then such a resolution fits with the tragic imagination as Williams understands it, which is never a form of pessimism, but rather a way of thinking, of bringing experience to language: ‘not to deny but “relocate” what has happened.” Williams, no less than Milbank, acknowledges ‘MacKinnon’s relentless stress on the limits of moral strategy and the unknowable outcome of even the most purportedly selfless and salvific actions,’ but questions Milbank’s claim that this tragic vision has no place in an authentic Christian vision. This is for two reasons: first is the bare fact that suffering can be narrated as a ‘cultural fact’ that creates a shared world, enabling action that is ‘a critique of fatalism and an affirmation of value;’ second if the stress on irony in any tragic play, where things do not have to be this way, but are played out in ignorance (an ignorance that both dramatic character and observing audience are implicated in). Choice and action always faces the limits of finitude, but there are always possibilities for other action, other perspectives to have been heard. Taken together this means that the misrecognitions of the self can open out towards a shared world of meaning (of speech and communal identity), and that the story of suffering can be told – even if it is not to be ‘softened or denied or consoled.’

This is why Williams links the tragic in Hegel to what it means to be a ‘thinking agent’ in a shared world of meaning. Tragedy is not about fate or the workings of some external force on a helpless human subject, but rather becomes a moment of misrecognition in the development of the self. When the self identifies either with an external object or a

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77 Ibid., 114.
78 Ibid., 115.
79 Ibid., 134.
static interiority, it sees itself in competition with others to find meaning, and it is this self-identification that undermines an 'openness to the wholeness that is my destiny or vocation as a truly thinking agent.' Here the self becomes a fixed object for contemplation, rather than something to be discovered. 'But any self so contemplated is a fiction,' for meaning and identity can only be found in the 'shared enterprise of thinking, the unfolding of spirit in mutual recognition and misrecognition.'

Williams sees Hegel developing this further in the contrast between ancient and modern tragedy. In the first the Self identifies with an external set of requirements (what the gods require), whereas in the second it is an individual and internal set of requirements (how I can follow my heart). Antigone, as an example of the first, begins her journey of selfhood by identifying and projecting freedom onto the gods, whereas Bolt’s Thomas Moore knows himself as an independent individual, but feels duty bound to his interior principles. But for Hegel what is tragic in each case is ‘the self’s misrecognition of itself.’

Even as ancient tragedy moves towards the external and universal and modern tragedy moves toward the inward and the personal, the same mistake is a belief in ‘mythical pictures of a given and fixed selfhood,’ and the need instead is to become mobilised as a thinking agent, to find oneself in the searching movements of mutual intelligibility and recognition. Tragedy therefore becomes ‘a deeply troubled reflection on the cost of decision and commitment ... the mechanism that swings into action when pure will is pitted against unyielding reality.’ Tragedy ‘tells you what happens when self and truth part company.’ This can never be some ‘speculative closure’ (contra Milbank), but rather exists ‘to persuade us, repeatedly and diversely to think better.’

Williams argues that all of this is about the promise and risk of language: as that which

80 Ibid., 57-58.
81 Ibid., 63.
82 Ibid., 66.
83 Ibid., 68.
84 Ibid., 70.
both generates a shared world of meaning in which suffering can be communicated, but also as that which encodes strategies of manipulation and management. Language can unsettle power relations in its silence and learning, or else it can generate defensiveness or advantage. There is no getting away from this, but it is only the unfolding of ‘spirit,’ the endless negotiations of meaning that allow this shared world to open up.

But what of the calm Hegelian voice of reason and the possibility of post-tragic reconciliation? For Williams Hegelian ‘reconciliation’ is not about the ‘majestically unrolling advance of “reason,”’ but is rather

about sustaining the conviction that what has happened is, precisely, outrageous, menacing, and yet at the same time capable of contemplation and of being represented in speech. This moral peace is the knowledge that the catastrophe of the tragic narrative is not an inevitable destiny but an episode in the discovery of thinking.85

Williams sees that for Hegel, ‘the “triumph” of thought is not the triumph of a comprehensive system of rational values but the emergence once and for all of a universal practice of mutual attention and exploratory speech ... a practice of reasoning love.’86 Tragedy is what happens where there is a ‘severance between ethical purpose and actuality’87 or in Williams’ terms when self and truth fall apart. Here the beautifully crafted images of the self need to be taken apart in the face of actual historical encounter and negotiation. Existence itself is not tragic, rather Hegel insists it represents a stage in the development of spirit where the subject identifies with a fixed image of itself (either external or internal) and what can go wrong at this stage. ‘Every construct of the self carries the possibility of misrecognition and so of tragic collision,’88 but not necessarily so. Even so, ‘the journey towards law and compassion that is figured in the tragic experience requires a disruption that will leave our habitual perceiving and feeling seriously wounded; incurably wounded ... this is the only kind of cure that addresses the depth of our trauma and dysfunction as individuals and societies and begins to reconstitute us as psyche.’89

85 Ibid., 71.
86 Ibid., 72.
88 Williams, The Tragic Imagination, 75.
89 Ibid., 78-79.
Williams has been described as having 'an authorial voice that combines the street-wiseness of a broadsheet columnist with the speculative gift of Hegel.'90 In this section I have explored the importance of Hegel on Williams’ thought in terms of the relatedness of the self, the unfinished nature of its own conceptions and sociality, and the necessity of self-discovery in terms of kenosis and dispossession. Hegel refuses to think the self in abstraction and isolation, constantly situating it in language and history. But more than this, Hegel plots this narrative of language and history in terms of cross and resurrection, a narration of God’s finding of himself-in-the-other. Hegel enables Williams’ vision of the cost of human agency, the ubiquity of loss and the tragic aspects of misrecognition and violence that need to be confronted and sublated in all human sociality and human language. It is the vulnerable mobility of the self – its endless uncovering of previous fictive understandings of itself as a fixed object of its own attention, or else its endless negotiation of its shared world – that paradoxically draw us into closest relationship with God. But once more the focus is on cost: the hard work of the self’s truthful constructions in a conflictual and ambiguous world, and the costly deflections of desire that constitute the movements of divine love. For Hegel, as for Williams, these movements are one and the same.

Milbank, Vico and the Poetic Self

Vico’s genre defies easy characterisation as it combines the contradictory and the problematic in an encyclopedic mythology for an alternative modernity. Vico’s writing embodies the ‘the mobile curves’ of baroque style’ in order to express what he sees as ‘the configurations of a mobile, open reality.’91 Like Hegel, his is a systematic enterprise, but with a twist, ‘a comprehensive project that weaves together into unified totality disparate questions of literature, rhetoric, history, religion, language, myth, philosophy, politics, law.’92 Vico’s works, particularly his New Science,93 harness an intellectual and

90  Nichols, ”Lost Icons: Book Review,” 509.
92  Ibid., xi.
polemical energy as he eschews abstraction and mere rationalism and attempts instead to summon 'the interested character of knowledge.' Vico’s work can be seen as ‘a voyage of discovery to the roots of man’s memories in order to divine the laws of history and the shape of the future’. At the centre of his work is the poetic imagination, a cultural making or shaping, understanding as sculpture. This means that Vico stresses the significance of both language and myth for the formation of human history and culture. It would be difficult to overstate the Vichian aspects of Milbank’s vision. From his inaugural two volume doctoral thesis and across his entire oeuvre, Vico is Milbank’s constant companion. Plotting his own way through the scholarly ’Vichian divide,’ Milbank sees him neither as a conservative anti-Enlightenment thinker, nor as a secular moderniser in religious guise, but rather as one who generates an alternative vision of modernity that weaves together a vision that is at once both ancient and modern. Milbank’s Vico therefore attempts to combine an authentic Christian vision with a new emphasis on how humanity constructs its social and cultural world through language, poetics and art. I shall chart this vision in terms of: (i) Vico and the Cartesian Self; (ii) the Self, Language and Violence; (iii) the Subversion of Plato and a new vision for the Modern Self; and (iv) Vico’s Autobiography and the ’Vichian’ Self.

Vico and the Cartesian Self

In On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians, Vico criticises Descartes for prioritising abstract rational thought over historically and culturally embedded ways of knowing. Descartes is wrong to argue that ’metaphysics alone provides us with an indubitable truth and from it, as from a wellspring, flow in the other sciences secondary truths.’ If this ’indubitable truth’ is the Cartesian ’cogito, ergo sum,’ Milbank argues that such a

94 Brennan, Borrowed Light, 44 & 45.
cogito is always interrupted by language, history and culture, as thinking is only possible with this language and in this place.

Just as in God there is an original word, an original relation, an original signifying, an original ‘supplement,’ so also in human culture, or ‘the metaphysics of the human mind,’ the origin is the projection of language, the already-begun development of the human future.98

There can be no a priori moment of pure reflection or ahistorical essence, but rather the human self is radically mobile, future-orientated and constructed through its cultural transformations. God is also imagined ‘culturally’ with the Logos as more than reason, conceived here as a dynamic relationality and as the apotheosis of artistic creativity. For Milbank, Vico’s understanding ‘exactly reverses the path of the Cartesian method,’ by ‘an embrace of the historical, the philological and the contingent.’99 There can be no individual and abstract reflection on truth, but rather only a living into ‘the accumulated weight of human wisdom and experience.’100 In this way Vico develops a view of the self, not floating in a timeless, supra-historical realm of essences, as Descartes would have it, but a self caught in ‘the unfolding and carnality of time.’101 Milbank pushes it further, suggesting that ‘there are no things, no substances, only shifting relations and generations in time.’102

Taking issue with Descartes for positing an invulnerable self, unaffected by materiality and time, Vico imagines a self shaping and shaped by culture. If Descartes fails ‘to capture human action in its transformative encounter with materialities,’103 then Vico generates ‘a theory of making as participation.’104 Here, ‘the true is precisely what is made. And, therefore, the first truth is in God, because God is the first Maker.’105 God as the ‘first Maker’ does not simply refer to God’s creation of the world out of nothing, but more radically to the generation of the Logos. Christ is created, but Milbank argues

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100 Ibid.
102 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 426.
that Vico remains orthodox by arguing that Christ is eternally made, just as the Fathers had argued that he was eternally begotten. This now means that the human self’s relationship to truth is primarily active and generative. Vico’s vision is both ‘modern’ with a stress on the artificial and constructed nature of things, but also combines this with a ‘premodern caution,’ as human knowing and human making are only ever a partial mirroring of God’s activity. Again and again Vico likens our making to the two-dimensional creation of a painting, whereas God sculpts a dynamic three-dimensional world. ‘In this way we fabricate our own experience of the world – the equivalent of a two-dimensional representation of the three-dimensional world that God has created.’

Vico’s idiosyncratic style and its fascination with myths and monsters also throws into question Cartesian, rational models of the self. Stating in his New Science that ‘because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, whenever it is lost in ignorance, man makes himself the measure of all things,’ Vico exposes both the ‘conceit of nations’ and the ‘conceit of scholars’ through his colourful imaginings of our human origins. Rather than emerging from some abstract rationality or the civility of culture, humanity first appears as wandering giants walking amongst their own excrement. Vico provocatively reminds us ‘that we are the products of a primitiveness we no longer recognize in ourselves.’ Whereas the conceit of the nations and of scholars make the self or the nation the illusory measure of reality, Vico’s myth of the giants is ‘a fable of the harsh and alien origins of history.’

Milbank’s encounter with Vico funds his own sense of the construction of the self and its mobile transformations in time and culture. Sometimes it does seem like the style of his own writing, eschewing a sense of ‘the carnality of time’ and generating an overly abstract and systematised account, undermines such mobility. In Milbank’s writing on Vico, he constantly stresses this sense of the contingent while running the risk of presenting Vico’s writing as an abstract and static metaphysician, rather than a poetical

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106 Ibid., 31.
107 Vico, New Science, 75.
108 Brennan, Borrowed Light, 42.
110 This same difficulty will be encountered in the next chapter when we consider his understanding of the Church, an endlessly mobile performance through time, and yet a curiously fated and static one.
writer who ‘adopts the mobile curves of the baroque style.’

However, Milbank’s analysis of Vico points to the priority of the imaginative, the poetic and mythic, strategies that constantly resist the contemporary move to freeze thought in the metaphysical and the scientific. If,

Descartes mathematicizes the order of nature and assigns to philosophy the task of pursuing the abstract ... Vico instead retrieves the thick shadows of the night, the tumults of the body, the fits of passion, man’s dark and incandescent imaginings in the face of nature’s perturbations ... in short, the world of concrete human things.

With a language of myth and metaphor and through poetry and image, Vico strives to return us to the fleshy textures of our embodiment.

The Self, Language and Violence

Milbank sees Vico at his most creative in his poetic contrast between Jewish and pagan beginnings. Vico imagines one origin for the gentile nations based ‘in terms of the invention of the god ‘Jove’ , but also insists ‘on the dramatic separation of Jewish history from this history of the gentiles.’ It is this radical separation between the gentiles and Hebrew peoples that provides the impetus for much of Vico’s metaphysical thinking. In the history of the gentiles, ‘the same myths ... keep shifting and reappearing’ over the ages of gods, heroes and men, whereas ‘the history of the Hebrews unfolds in a linear movement and not in the repetitive cycle of natural history.’

This is the corso and ricorso of the gentile nations alongside the salvation history of the Hebrews. What is important here is that in Vico’s project there is to be no reconciliation between these two ‘systems’ and so the desire for a totality is constantly frustrated.

Gentile history begins, for Vico, with bestial giants wandering through the forest raising their eyes and observing the heavens after they hear the rumblings of thunder. Interpreting the heavens as ‘a giant living body,’ they discern in its rumblings the voice of god, and in this moment language and culture are born and humanity begins to emerge. Milbank contends that, ‘this is no mere history of origins,’ but rather that we all ‘still live
in the mythical but culturally enabling space opened out by "Jove." Milbank focuses on the significance that Vico affords to mythos and poiesis here, and he draws out of Vico a fundamental point for his own theological project: 'gentile language is constituted as an original withholding of a force of destruction' providing 'the structure of a society and a religion which thinks in terms of an “inhibition” and a “re-channelling” of a primal chaos and a primal anger.' Hence, 'the very root of pagan culture – religion conceived as a system of idolatry, divination and sacrifice – is utterly contaminated by violence and self-deception.' All histories and cultures based on this myth conceal an underlying violence in their cultural formations and it is this ‘mythic violence’ that Milbank seeks to excavate in alternative metaphysical systems to Christianity whether ancient or modern. Here Milbank's use of Vico extends and deepens his Augustinian critique of society.

The dynamics of Vico’s system operate in this tension between the ‘myth of Jove’ and the myth of Hebrew origins. And Milbank sees this difference as decisive. The difference is not between myth and truth, for as we have already seen, truth is as much mythos as it is logos for Milbank, as much the construction of an imaginative world as it is a deduction of abstract principles and systems. No less poetic, then,

while the Hebrews recognized the things of nature and society as real, divine words, imbued with sacred life and significance, they did not collapse the inferred speaking subject into his signs, but retained a sense of his absence along with a sense of his presence.

For the gentiles meaning was collapsed into an immanent frame, a heaving body of chaos, both creative and destructive, the movements of chance or fate, both immovable and impersonal. But the Hebrews came to an alternative transcendent view which enabled an understanding of difference to emerge that was based in gift rather than violence. No longer is human society or culture to be predicated on violence and the ongoing repression of violence (Jove), now society can be re-configured around a narrative of original

117 Ibid., 49, 51.
119 See Milbank, Theology and Social Theory; Alan Thomson, Culture in a Post-Secular Context: Theological Possibilities in Milbank, Barth, and Bediako (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014).
120 Milbank, The Religious Dimension, 2, 77.
peace and gift. As Miner writes, 'Hebrew culture provides the unique counter-example to the claim that human culture originates in idolatry, divination and sacrifice.'\textsuperscript{121} The resonance with Milbank’s interpretation of Augustine is striking.

The difficulty here is that Milbank sets the pagan and the Hebrew up as rival systems as if a choice can be made between them: either you chose to live within a gentile \textit{mythos} forever marred by violence, or else you chose the Hebrew option and discover a world of peace. It is not at all evident what such a choice would look like. Vico’s view seems to be rather more nuanced. Recognising that there is more truth to be discerned in Judaism’s historical traditions, and that the rejection of divination is a key moment in their cultural beginnings, Vico’s understanding of the gentile nations is not one of unrelenting negativity, indeed their ability to navigate their violent mythical origins is not by escape into a Hebraic imagination, but rather through the shaping of aggression, violence and greed by divine Providence. It is interesting to note that while Vico sees Christianity as the apotheosis of human cultural expression, this is not because of its ‘choice’ of the Hebrew difference, but rather because of its creative synthesis of the grammar of both the gentiles and the Hebrews. As Vico himself writes, Christianity,

\begin{quote}
Teaches truths so sublime it receives into its service the most learned philosophies of the pagans, and cultivates three languages as its own: Hebrew, the most ancient in the world; Greek, the most delicate; and Latin, the most monumental.\textsuperscript{122}
\end{quote}

Indeed, it is this grammatical synthesis that enables Christian religion to ‘unite the wisdom enjoined by God with the wisdom of human reason,’\textsuperscript{123} to become the articulation of truth where reason, tradition and poetry meet. It is this creative synthesis – sustained by the tension between the pagan and the Hebrew – that is arguably the most significant element in Vico’s writing.

Milbank also sees Providence working within the parameters of this charitable poetic narration, and never as a suppression or containment of violence. The difficulty here is that Vico’s own understanding of Providence seems to work in exactly the way Milbank eschews, at least in terms of the gentile nations. In principle seven of the \textit{New Science} Vico writes:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{121} Miner, \textit{Vico, Genealogist of Modernity}, 114.
\textsuperscript{122} Vico, \textit{New Science}, 479.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 480.
\end{quote}
out of ferocity, avarice, and ambition, the three vices which plague the entire human race. It [legislation] creates armies, trade and courts, which form the might, affluence, and wisdom of commonwealths.\textsuperscript{124}

Vico goes on to link legislation with Providence by saying: ‘this axiom proves that divine providence exists and that it acts as a divine legislative mind.’ Here, at least, Providence takes what is violent and base and weaves and moulds it into something positive and creative. This ‘redemptive’ power of Providence, rather than its innocent creativity can also be seen in Vico’s engagement with Hobbes. Vico’s disagreement with Hobbes is not because violence lurks at the centre of Hobbes’ understanding of the human, but that rather ‘what is missing from Hobbes’ conception of society is the providential basis of natural law.’\textsuperscript{125} For Vico and Hobbes, ‘the true is the made,’ but whereas for Hobbes it is the State alone that can civilise the violent urges of humanity, for Vico, ‘only religion ... is powerful enough to subdue them.’\textsuperscript{126} Both Vico and Hobbes agree that ‘fierce and violent men’ need to be ‘led from their lawless condition to enter civilization and create nations,’\textsuperscript{127} they simply disagree as to the means. The second difficulty is that for Vico ‘all is Jove’ and the sacred history of the Hebrews seems to act as the exception that proves the rule. In Vico’s own work the history of the Hebrews is ‘itself exiled, as it were, to the margins of history.’\textsuperscript{128} Even if ‘sacred history is the constant against which cyclic history is to be understood’\textsuperscript{129} – and perhaps, even judged – it seems the two need to be held in tension, and that their relationship is more difficult than Milbank allows. However, Milbank is still right to argue against a reduction of Vico’s thought away from the religious, and to assert that Vico does not simply want to endorse ‘the “pagan” cyclical theory of history.’\textsuperscript{130} Instead, this narrative of \textit{ricorso} is ‘crossed by a quite different and older story: Augustine’s account of the two cities.’ In the end Vico indeed expounds ‘a \textit{difference} between pagan and Biblical assumptions, and thereby two different “makings,” two different histories – the Hebrew one \textit{not} less human, but more so, as involving more con-

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{126} Vico, \textit{New Science}, 87.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{128} Mazzotta, \textit{The New Map of the World}, 14.
\textsuperscript{129} Verene, \textit{Vico’s New Science}, 60.
\textsuperscript{130} Milbank, \textit{The Religious Dimension}, 2, 272.
\end{flushright}
scious human *collaboration* with God.\textsuperscript{131} How we are implicated in one or other of these narratives is perhaps a more nuanced tale than Milbank is able to tell.

**The Subversion of Plato and a New Vision for the Modern Self**

Milbank argues that, in Vico, Platonic recollection is re-imagined as artistic and poetic anticipation. Here, ‘the Platonic picture of participation is finally subverted.’\textsuperscript{132} Whereas in Christian Neoplatonism there is the prior truth of the forms which precede all images and works, and humanity ‘forced through its material involvement to express itself in words and images’ can obtain ‘only a dim recall of the purity of truth,’ now in Vico ‘this picture is precisely reversed.’\textsuperscript{133} Here, the perfection of the divine consists ‘in its character of a completed work.’ As Vico writes: ‘Just as divine truth is what God sets in order and creates in the act of knowing it, so human truth is what man puts together and makes in the act of knowing it.’\textsuperscript{134} Instead of a recollection backwards, there is now a movement forwards. ‘Once human images imitated divine ideas, now human ideas tend towards divine images: once understanding was memory, now it is anticipation.’\textsuperscript{135} Here *poiesis* – as constructive creativity – constitutes the human, an intentionality that reaches forwards and in its creation of its cultural world captures something of the dynamism of divine creativity.

For Vico there is always a sense of limit in this human poetic and creative knowledge, where the material product always exceeds its author’s intention. But this sense of limit, argues Milbank, points towards a limitless creativity which enfolds it.\textsuperscript{136} ‘This means that our finitude is simultaneously re-established and redefined with every further act of making which constitutes new boundaries for human thought. This finitude is not simply the negation of the infinite, but also the opening to the infinite.’\textsuperscript{137} This discovery of limits presents us with a choice: either we can decide on what Vico terms the *via resolutia*, a dissection of life into its constituent parts in order to analyse and categorise, or

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{132} *The Religious Dimension*, 1, 113.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{134} Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom*, 46.
\textsuperscript{135} Milbank, *The Religious Dimension*, 1, 113.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 109.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.
else limit can spur us on to new imaginations of the possible. The first option Vico views as an atomising, reducing activity, analogous to the dissection of a dead body, Milbank’s ‘negation of the infinite.’ The second option takes limit ‘in a positive manner’ as ‘an opening out of an unlimited prospect, an infinite possibility of truth.’

It is this emphasis on the invention of the world that makes Vico modern. ‘The modern world,’ as Mazzotta reminds us, ‘is no longer ... a book that pre-exists us and whose signs we seek to decipher ... The modern world is made by human art and will ... it is a human world, and its emblem is the work of art.’ But whereas Vico’s contemporaries moved from the Medieval vita contemplativa to give primacy to the vita activa, or the act of making, Vico holds the two together, arguing ‘for the necessary interlocking of two distinct modes of seeing and making,’ where ‘making needs to be grounded in the very mode of contemplation from which, paradoxically, modernity seeks to break away.’

Contrary to both, Milbank argues that this Vichian vision is an extension of an authentic catholicity into the new ‘modern’ concern of human creativity and the ‘constructedness’ of the world, where philosophical recollection gives way to artistic anticipation.

**Vico’s Autobiography and the Vichian Self**

Although Milbank does not give direct attention to Vico’s *Autobiography*, it is here that Vico portrays ‘how the self enters, shapes, and is itself shaped by the fabric of history.’ Whereas ‘the Cartesian model of subjective individualism ... defines the self in terms of its timeless, innermost, mental realm,’ Vico ‘dramatizes the historical consciousness of

138 Ibid., 110.
140 Ibid., xvi.
self as ceaselessly time-bound, shifty, and always in the process of being formed and reformed.\textsuperscript{143} Even as the Cartesian self disengages from the world in order to become a spectator from outside, Vico shows that the self is a construct, generated by the making of a biography. In writing about the self, the self comes to be. And Vico’s portrayal of this self could be hardly more different from the Cartesian cogito. In his opening paragraph, Vico portrays a difficult beginning: having a cheerful father but a melancholic mother, he finds his character caught between the two, and by the age of seven he falls from a ladder and fractures his cranium and so develops a tumor. Things are so desperate his doctor predicts ‘that he would either die ... or grow up an idiot.’\textsuperscript{144} Mazzotta claims that Vico’s strategy is deliberate:

\begin{quote}
  in contrast to the Cartesian view of the subject as essentially disembodied mind or consciousness (res cogitans) and as the firm, certain foundation of all knowledge, Vico drafts a picture of the subject in its full etymological, anti-Cartesian force as sub-jectum, as literally thrown under, without a firm foundation, losing control of oneself, and provisionally without consciousness.\textsuperscript{145}
\end{quote}

Later in the same work, unlike Descartes, Vico looks to the ‘totality of memory and tradition, as the ground in which the education of the self is unavoidably rooted,’\textsuperscript{146} and he will continue to stress – with Augustine – that the self is not just given, but in some important sense is to be made:

\begin{quote}
  if for modern theories of subjectivism there is a self-defining, pure, inner self that the outside world can never darken, for Vico there is no a priori essence for the self: one is what one makes of oneself, and one makes of oneself what one knows, so that being, knowledge, and making are ceaselessly interwoven in an endless recirculation.\textsuperscript{147}
\end{quote}

In this way, the self becomes a work of art.

**Milbank, Rose and the Utopian Self?**

Gillian Rose offers a ‘searching critique’ of Milbank’s project in *The Broken Middle*,\textsuperscript{148} based around his refusal of the ‘broken middle,’ the ambiguities of law (seen in her dis-

\begin{footnotes}
143  Ibid., 18-19.
146  Ibid., 26.
147  Ibid., 27.
\end{footnotes}
cussion of the painting *The Ashes of Phocion* by Poussin), and finally in his demonising of the secular and exaltation of ecclesia. She understands Milbank as telling a tale of two cities, that of Athens and the New Jerusalem. Athens is cast ‘as the sinful city, birthed and steeped in endemic violence,’ only managing to avoid utter chaos by the appointment of ‘the stator, the divine limiter of violence.’\(^{149}\) The first city is countered by the ‘nomad city,’ the Church, a city characterised by ‘pilgrimage and inclusivity.’ Milbank’s ‘theology of harmonious peace’ for Rose seeks to build a new city based only on ‘antinomian and ahistorical sands,’\(^{150}\) a city that avoids the ambiguity of what she terms the ‘broken middle.’ Far from throwing us back into the tensions and fractures of actual lived human experience, Rose contends that Milbank’s theology of ‘untarnished ecclesial practice’ promises only our exit from them.

To understand Rose’s critique, a discussion of the ‘broken middle’ and her way of doing philosophy is necessary. Beyond ‘postmodern dualisms’ of self and world, particular and universal, same and different, Rose’s broken middle interrogates the breaks within these relationships, attending to the fractures between them. For Marcus Pound the broken middle is ‘a place of anxiety to the extent it is the sheer “givenness” of the political and ethical situation that resists the retreat into sanctified beginnings or utopian ends.’\(^{151}\) Schick suggests that ‘it explores the gap between the (universal) promises of modern law and (particular) social and political experience.’\(^{152}\) And Shanks argues that the broken middle ‘implies absolute critical restlessness not only in relation to the utopian or revolutionary critics of the status quo, but just as much, also, in relation to its mere upholders.’\(^{153}\)

Rose understands two ways to do philosophy: deterministically, a thinking only in terms of ‘fixed, closed conceptual structures;’ and aporetically, ‘by leaving gaps and silences in the mode of representation.’\(^{154}\) Rose sees these gaps and silences as creative spaces where the hard work of thinking can occur. And so the second ‘aporetic’ way –

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149  Thomson, *Culture in a Post-Secular Context*, 142.
150  Ibid., 143.
152  Kate Schick, “Re-Cognizing Recognition: Gillian Rose’s ‘Radical Hegel’ and Vulnerable Recognition,” ibid.: 99.
Rose’s own path – understands that ‘ethics and metaphysics are torn halves of an integral freedom to which they have never added up,’ and she sees her own work as a ‘reflection on the analogies between the soul, the city and the sacred,’ in which ‘the “ana” expresses the gap, while the “logy,” the logos, makes it possible to speak.’ Philosophy and action are always radically vulnerable for Rose, always at risk, but still thought and action are possible, but now must courageously open themselves out to the gaps and contingencies of history. It seems that Milbank is accused of avoiding this risk by retreating into a utopian fantasy of idealised ecclesial activity, unaware of the necessary violence of its own constructions.

Rose revisits her musings on the two cities in *Mourning Becomes the Law: Athens and Jerusalem: a Tale of Three Cities.* She begins by suggesting that we have fallen in love with the idea of the community, but that this understanding of community is already ‘disrupted.’ Community is always already a fractured reality, caught between the universal (the general will of the people), and the particular (the exclusive interests of a particular people). Rose suggests that rather than live within this tension, we attempt to mend the breach – where ‘modernity and the critique of modernity have broken their promises’ – through ‘hope for the New Jerusalem.’ She describes the life of this new Jerusalem in terms which have a distinct ‘Milbankian’ echo: ‘a collective life without inner or outer boundaries, without obstacles or occlusions, within and between souls and within and between cities,’ and yet argues that such utopian cities eschew ‘the perennial work which constantly legitimates and delegitimates the transformation of power into authority of different kinds.’ Rose suggests that those like Milbank who have turned their back on a modernity that has only managed to prove that ‘enlightenment is domination’ have actually turned their backs on the only sociality possible. ‘A life of unbounded mutuality … without separation and its inevitable anxieties’ can only finally be a ‘phantasy life which effectively destroys the remnant of political life.’

155 Ibid., 9.
156 Ibid., 10.
157 See ibid., 15-40.
158 Ibid., 16.
159 Ibid., 21-22.
Rose believes that Milbank’s ‘utopianism’ leads him away from the necessary ambiguities of law. It is in this highly charged context that Rose describes Poussin’s painting *Gathering the Ashes of Phocion*. Here we see Phocion’s wife with a female attendant outside the city wall at the site of her husband’s burning. She gathers his ashes to inter them at home as she has been given no other place for them to be at rest. Rose criticises interpretations of this artwork that see Phocion’s wife’s actions as an in-breaking of a new Jerusalem outside the constraints and violence of the old city of Athens.

In this presentation of the rational order in itself as unjust power, and the opposition of this domination to the pathos of redeeming love, I discerned the familiar argument that all boundaries of knowledge and power, of soul and city, amount to illegitimate force, and are to be surpassed by the new ethics of unbounded community.¹⁶⁰

Rose instead sees the gathering of the ashes as a protest against arbitrary power, not as a protest against power and law as such, and takes her stance from the artist’s portrayal of ‘the magnificent, gleaming, classical buildings which frame and focus this political act’, and in which she can discern ‘no malignant foreboding.’¹⁶¹ Instead this is a representation of ‘the rational order which throws into relief the specific act of injustice perpetrated by the current representatives of the city.’¹⁶² In this way, the city itself stands as an indictment on this act, a symbol of the possibility of the right use of power and law. For Rose it is the city, in all its compromise and ambiguity, where the possibility of political action emerges, indeed it is the only real site where political action can be risked at all. To escape beyond its walls into what might be termed a fantasy of utopian community, without bounds and without law, only ‘perpetuates endless dying and endless tyranny, and … ruins the possibility of political action.’¹⁶³

If one of the dangers is this angelic idealisation of community, the other must be the demonisation of the city. Here Rose imagines Auschwitz as ‘another city’ to be considered. The risk, as Rose sees it, is to see the holocaust as the necessary outcome of modernity, where ‘reason is revealed by the Holocaust to be contaminated … [and] provides the standard for demonic anti-reason; and the Holocaust founds the call for the

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 25.
¹⁶² Ibid., 26.
¹⁶³ Ibid.
new ethics."164 Rose sees such an analysis as too easy, eliminating ‘the possibility of any specific investigation into the contingencies of collusion by making collusion already a foregone conclusion.’165 Instead of the ‘now-sacralized opposition between demonic reason and new ethics, between old Athens and new Jerusalem,’ Rose sees the horrors of Auschwitz as

arising out of, and as falling back into, the ambitions and the tensions, the utopianism and the violence, the reason and the muddle, which is the outcome of the struggle between the politics and the anti-politics of the city. This is the third city – the city in which we all live and with which we are too familiar.166

Like the wife of Phocion, the soul must return to the city after its mourning is completed – perhaps a mourning for the loss of a fictitious innocence? – ‘renewed and reinvigorated for participation … ready to take on the difficulties and injustices of the existing city.’167

‘To cover persisting anxiety with the violence of a New Jerusalem masquerading as love’ undermines both the ‘possibility of structural analysis’ and any meaningful political action by wilfully ignoring the ‘ambivalence inherent in power and knowledge.’168 Rose asserts that ‘without the soul and without the city, we cannot help anyone.’169 Instead of ‘retreating to any phantasy of the local or exclusive community,’ the risks of identity are to be staked in which the social and the political is traversed ‘precisely by making mistakes, by taking the risk of action, and then by reflecting on its unintended consequences, and then taking the risk, yet again, of further action, and so on.’170

Rose’s understanding of the self is one that recognises ‘our fundamental human vulnerability and contingency.’171 Recognising, as she does, a ‘radical Hegel,’172 there is an emphasis on a risk-taking, constantly learning self with an ‘agonistic conception of recognition’ that ‘embraces ambiguity, uncertainly and vulnerability.’ Here the self can only emerge, slowly and painfully, in a context of ‘mutual recognition’ where ‘we are radically

164 Ibid., 27-28.
165 Ibid., 33.
166 Ibid., 34.
167 Ibid., 36.
168 Ibid.
169 Ibid., 38.
170 Ibid.
172 Rose, Hegel Contra Sociology, viii.
dependent on the recognition of others in order to become our selves.'173 But this also requires the hard work of understanding that, like the self, 'the other is also bounded and vulnerable, enraged and invested, isolated and inter-related.'174 All of this requires a process which is 'always dynamic and struggle-filled' where an initial movement of recognition is inevitably followed by mis-recognition and mis-representation, but then is risked again in a wider and deeper context of (mis)informed mutuality. Rose's view 'assumes the messiness and unpredictability of our human world, highlighting our vulnerability as political agents and the riskiness of political action.'175 This is an 'unsettled and unsettling'176 understanding of the self as socially formed, 'a fundamental refusal to think in terms of an "innocent us against guilty them" ... a prophetic project of bringing to light the very deepest conflicts by which one's culture is fractured.'177 For Rose, 'love is a "riskful engagement" and involves negotiating boundaries between oneself and others, knowing that we will get love wrong, but continuing to do "love's work."'178

This means that the broken middle, for Rose, is endemic to the human condition; but so is the temptation to mend it. And so Milbank imagines a 'triumphant ecclesiology, as the sociology of the over-controlled secular is inverted into the sociality of the saints.'179 Milbank stands accused of fleeing from the reality of a fractured and compromised self and as refusing the dangers of the secular and retreating instead into an enclosed ecclesial utopia. But is there a way that Milbank also can answer this accusation? It is to Milbank's essay "On Complex Space" in The Word Made Strange that we might look for such an answer.180 It is here, I want to suggest, as Milbank constructs his understanding of 'Baroque' or 'Complex Space,' that he actually refuses the binary movements that Rose accuses him of and generates a context much like her 'broken middle' and yet with a much stronger articulation of eschatological hope.

Milbank's 'Baroque Space' avoids the binary antagonisms of state verses the individual by imagining a diversity of mediating spaces and bodies in society. Milbank considers

173 Schick, "Re-Cognizing Recognition," 89.
174 Rose, Mourning Becomes the Law, 37.
175 Schick, "Re-Cognizing Recognition," 96.
176 Rose, The Broken Middle, 155.
177 Shanks, Against Innocence, 32-33.
179 Rose, The Broken Middle, xiii.
two ‘chronotopes’ (a ‘co-articulation of space and time’ borrowed from Michael Bakhtin). First, the chronotope of Enlightenment where, ‘political reality is a “simple space” suspended between the mass of atomic individuals on the one hand, and an absolutely sovereign centre on the other.’\footnote{Ibid., 275.} This Enlightenment space can itself be conceived in two ways: first as individuals under a sovereign head, and second as individual choice is mobilised by the workings of the market. Both evidence a lack of mediation, there is only the individual and the state, the centre and the margin. ‘Baroque Space’ resists the movements of liberal capitalism which threatens to reduce all human social organisation to market economics in which the good can only be imagined in terms of competition and the aggressive accumulation of wealth, allowing for ‘intermediate organisms, with their own ‘group personality’ between the individual and state bodies.’\footnote{Ibid., 275-76.} It is these intermediate organisms that enable ‘a mutuality of relations’ which together subvert dichotomous relationships of individual verses state, and re-imagines societal good beyond mere assertion and state control.\footnote{Thomson, \textit{Culture in a Post-Secular Context}, 168.}

Milbank creates his social imaginary by picturing a gothic cathedral: a kind of living ruin steeped in history and particularity, but always growing through new additions, styles and extensions. This is a construction that speaks of transcendence in its archways, vaultings, ceilings and coloured windows, but also of the limits and failures of human imagination in its breakages and architectural anomalies. It is a construct that ‘embodies constant recognition of imperfection, of the fragmentary and therefore always already “ruined” character of the gothic structure.’\footnote{Milbank, \textit{The Word Made Strange}, 276.} Already we can begin to see that inhabiting such gothic ruins, in the middle of ultimate aspiration and ‘fallen insufficiency’ is much like the anxious and mediated space of Rose’s broken middle. This articulation of complex space is no mere utopian escapism to an idealised community without bounds, but seems to demand the kind of action that takes place right at the centre of ‘the mingled ethical and epistemological posings of the other, the partner in

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Ibid., 275.}
\item \footnote{Ibid., 275-76.}
\item \footnote{Thomson, \textit{Culture in a Post-Secular Context}, 168.}
\item \footnote{Milbank, \textit{The Word Made Strange}, 276.}
\end{itemize}
the formation of our contingent and unstable identities.\textsuperscript{185} In 'Baroque Space' the social can be inhabited in both its aspiration and its ruin.

Milbank’s 'Baroque Space' holds together the tension of human construction in its imaginative ascent but also in its broken limitations and failures. It is a place of 'literal embodiment,' having as much to do with geography and history as it does with social organisation, a poetical construction of its own social imaginary. Taking both the ‘home’ and ‘city’ beyond an uneasy alliance of rights and assertions, now both \textit{oikos} and \textit{polis} are to orientated to the common good which is beyond mere utility. A balance between the vertical movement of governance and authority and the horizontal movement of communal association deconstructs oppressive hierarchical ordering and empowers a multiplicity of voices and perspectives. All this means that ‘instead of an Enlightenment teleological vision of gradual necessary evolution, one has a \textit{dramatic} sense of history as ceaseless loss and gain.’\textsuperscript{186} Once more the connections with Rose are striking.\textsuperscript{187}

Such ‘complex space’ is

\begin{quote}
orientated to consensus beyond mere mutual expediency or contractual obligation;
orientated also to the diversification of sources of power, and to a guild organization permitting a measure of economic democracy and collective preservation of standards of excellence.\textsuperscript{188}
\end{quote}

The final contrast that Milbank draws between Enlightenment ‘simple space’ and gothic ‘complex space’ is that the former is secular, the latter sacred. Instead of the merely procedural or the agonistic movements of the market, sociality is now orientated towards a good that is articulated through a plurality of perspectives and organisations, both civic and religious. There are striking similarities between Milbank’s social vision and Williams’ explorations of what he calls ‘complex society’ in \textit{Faith in the Public Square}.\textsuperscript{189} Williams also writes of the need to move beyond society imagined as a mass of individuals afforded rights according to personal preference. Whereas in secular models the state is caught between the divisions of public and private (which is why the religious is such a difficult category for the contemporary imagination), Williams wants to move beyond

\begin{footnotes}
\item[185] Rose, \textit{Mourning Becomes the Law}, 7.
\item[186] Milbank, \textit{The Word Made Strange}, 279.
\item[187] See particularly the final paragraph of Rose, \textit{Mourning Becomes the Law}, 13.
\item[188] Milbank, \textit{The Word Made Strange}, 279.
\item[189] Williams, \textit{Faith in the Public Square}, 134.
\end{footnotes}
this, to re-imagine the state as 'a “community of communities” rather than a monopolistic power,' a 'pluralist pattern of social life, with a lot of decentralized and co-operative activity.'\footnote{190}{Milbank, Vico and the Poetic Self} Milbank's vision is not simply a nostalgic one, for even as he emphasises the 'horizontal, associative, consensual aspects' of medieval society, he nevertheless gives his retrieval of 'complex space' a final Vichian counter-modern twist where instead of a hierarchy of essential identities the shape of society is discovered through the constructive possibilities of the human imagination. It is precisely here that Milbank's and Rose's projects come into closest focus as 'socialism has to take a wager on justice,'\footnote{191}{Milbank, The Word Made Strange} and where human political action is to be risked on this wager. As Thomson argues,

> Milbank is here attempting to negotiate the broken middle, seeking a critical engagement entailing neither escapism nor capitulation. He is 'in the mix' so to speak, advocating an immanent encounter of law and ethics, not to mend the break but to live in it, fully cognizant of the disjunction but acting anyway.\footnote{192}{Thomson, Culture in a Post-Secular Context}

Just as Rose negotiates 'the soul, the city, and the sacred,' through her articulation of the broken middle, so Milbank attempts the same, this time by inhabiting the colourful ruins of Gothic Space.

In many ways Milbank's work can be seen as 'a consummate summary of Vico.'\footnote{193}{Ibid., 114-15.} It is Vico, rather than Nietzsche, that enables Milbank's genealogical exposure of the secular self and its implication in narratives of violence, and it is Vico who enables his Augustinian move of positing an alternative narrative of peace that instead grounds difference. More than this, Vico's is the voice that challenges modernity's equation of factum and dominium, where the human sphere of creative activity is reduced to expressions of arbitrary will. Instead Vico enables Milbank's theology of culture where the mobile contingency of the self's constructions, its language and its world, participate in the constructive energies of God in which human making stretches beyond itself in anticipation of a Christological and eschatological fulfilment. Through an inversion of Plato and a deconstruction of Descartes, Vico sets the trajectory for Milbank's imagining of an alternative modernity. Now contingency, temporality, language and identity – far

\footnote{190}{Ibid., 3-4.}
\footnote{191}{Milbank, The Word Made Strange, 283.}
\footnote{192}{Thomson, Culture in a Post-Secular Context, 167.}
\footnote{193}{Ibid., 114-15.}
from carving out an autonomous sphere of human activity – instead launch us into the transcendent giftedness that composes the self.

Conclusion

Milbank’s and Williams’ use of Hegel sees them at their most contradictory. Both argue for an endorsement of history and contingency, but this leads them in seemingly opposite directions. Milbank criticises Hegel for imposing a tragic and necessary dialectical pattern onto history, and radically questions whether ‘tarrying with the negative’ can ever fund a counter imagination and practice of human social belonging. Instead he proposes ‘a metaxological to-and-fro of the absolutely paradoxical’ to lift us beyond ‘Protestant gloom’ and into a Catholic celebration of divine plenitude. Williams, on the other hand, believing that in this world, ‘truth requires loss,’ sees Hegel as placing the cross between politics and metaphysics in which a context of ‘infinite relatedness’ can indeed emerge, but only through a movement of negation and dispossession. Milbank’s rejection of Hegel mirrors his embrace of Vico, a thinker no less interested in the constructions of the self and culture, but one who now re-imagines truth as an artistic creativity, which in its very dynamics anticipates the creative movements of Logos and Spirit. Once more the self is thought in terms of its cultural making, its mobile shapings in and through history and language. If Williams is right that the tragic aspect of Hegel is not an ontological straight-jacket to be put on history, but rather ‘a habit or skill of self-recognition,’ and if Vico holds the pagan and Hebrew in tension in his poetic reconstructions of the religious (as I have argued against Milbank), then perhaps Hegel and Vico can be understood together.

Now the self is only known by living into ‘the accumulated weight of human wisdom and experience’ (Milbank) in which ‘the act of interpreting, expressing ‘learning,’ is itself historical, strategic and without guarantee’ (Williams). Such a vision of the self combines a Hegelian stress on negotiation through relationality and language, with a Vi-

194 Williams, The Tragic Imagination, 74.
195 Milbank, The Religious Dimension, 1, 84.
196 Williams, Wrestling with Angels, 67.
chian openness to transformation in and through human making or culture. Williams sees the self as journeying through a certain estrangement and exile where life is conflictual, risky, and difficult, in which God is imagined as endless patience, enabling new meanings and a new ‘infinite relatedness’ to slowly emerge. Whereas Milbank sees that ‘every ricorso is a new possibility,’ and the self imaginatively and courageously constructing and reconstructing its world, and God is seen as endlessly creative, sculpting history and culture into new meanings and forms. Together the language of the self can be articulated in terms of limit and gift. Perhaps the pattern of infinite relatedness and poetic anticipation is not only that of cross and dispossession, or of poetic excess alone, but rather takes the shape of exile and homecoming, death and resurrection, kenosis and ascent. Both Williams and Milbank will go on to argue that just as this self is historically, socially and culturally formed, so is it ecclesiologically given in liturgy and sacrament. It is to this ‘givenness’ that the next chapter turns.

197 Brennan, Borrowed Light, 24.
Arenas of the Soul: Conflicting Visions for the Church?

Vладимир Лосский argues that there are two conflicting images of the saint. The first, from the Western tradition, speaks of an imitation of Christ so intimate that the saint is wounded with the marks of his passion, the stigmata. The second, from the Eastern tradition, is that of the saint transfigured by the energy of the divine, slowly becoming a living icon as one who is fully alive with God.

No saint of the Eastern Church has ever borne the stigmata, those outward marks which have made certain great Western saints and mystics as it were living patterns of the suffering Christ. But, by contrast, Eastern saints have very frequently been transfigured by the inward light of uncreated grace, and have appeared resplendent, like Christ on the mount of Transfiguration.¹

But what if these two visions of ecclesial saintliness could be held together? What if the way of the cross came to be seen as the path to glory? What if the saint was transfigured in her very woundedness? What if giftedness could only be known in narratives and practices of metanoia and absolution?

In this chapter I will explore Milbank’s and Williams’ ecclesiology in terms of the Church as ‘an arena of the soul’ where the practice and habits of the self can be formed. In the first section I will explore Milbank’s understanding of the church as the embrace of difference in terms of ontology of peace, an ‘out-narration’ of secular stories of sociability that finally claims the only authentic politics and economics. Alongside this I will consider Williams’ conception of Church as an experimental community realigning it-

self and its language in the wake of incarnation, death and resurrection, in which the Church proclaims Jesus as a ‘sign of contradiction,’ questioning and confronting impoverished narratives of the self. In the second section the surprising newness of orthodoxy will be discovered as Williams and Milbank argues for a dynamic reimagining of orthodoxy as radically creative and future orientated. Here the Church’s articulation of God is one of kenosis and ascent as it is first confronted with a strange and disturbing truth and then is taken into the excessive mystery of the divine. In the third section the Church is imagined as a community of gift, a playful reciprocity that mirrors the loving exchange of Father, Son and Spirit in the eternal Trinity. This is complemented by Williams’ exploration of sacramentality where the Church is once again brought to the foot of the cross, where human betrayal and fracture are taken up into the divine hospitality and transmuted into gift. In the next section I will consider the role of the bishop in terms of theurgy and kenosis. Only as the bishop draws the Church back to the central paschal mystery in a movement of sacramental dispossession can space for the giftedness of the other emerge. In the final section Williams’ understanding of the epiphanic nature of the Church will be considered as he reimagines an Orthodox emphasis on manifestation and glory in terms of kenosis and cross.

Both visions understand the Church in terms of what might be termed an ‘epiphanic anthropology’ as the Church is viewed as a human cultural construct – and so mobile and contingent – but also as showing forth a divine vision of the promise of human community, language and sociality. If, for Milbank, the Church articulates ‘a specifically Christian account of culture,’ then Williams’ Church also is ‘completely and utterly cultural; it does not simply exist in human culture, it exists as human culture ... a complex mass of anthropological data, or an intricate symbolic language that the believer learns to speak.’ It is here that Williams’ and Milbank’s understanding of the Church is most closely aligned. The Church is not to be understood primarily as a speaking agent, making abstract propositional truth-claims, but rather as a way of living, as something that actually happens. This means it is in the very ordinary aspects of the Church’s actions

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and activities – in breaking bread, in pouring water over a child's head, in listening and praying together – that something of the divine is to be seen. 'Theology, through ecclesiology,' is now 'concerned with specific, historical, socio-linguistic iterations of human sociality and living; in short, with culture.' Through its own cultural practice, the Church must now creatively construct its own response to Christ.

The Church as Counter-Narrative

It is in Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* that his understanding of the Church as 'counter-narrative' is first explored. He argues that 'the Church is already ... by virtue of its institution, a 'reading' of other human societies.' Milbank understands the Church as an interruption in history, and as a critique of human sociality, one that tells an alternative story within history itself, a story that exposes that history to judgement. 'This account of history and critique of human society ... belongs to its very "essence."' Such a view relies heavily on a creative re-reading of Augustine's *City of God*. Here the Church emerges from within the previous narration of the City of Rome as a 'reading' and judgement of its politics and sociality, and as a counter-part to it. In this new disruptive narrative the 'Roman world,' based on domination, violence and the lust for power, 'has been interrupted by another beginning and another community ... where there is nothing but the vision of peace.' This creative tension where the Church appears both as 'a community of peace' but also as a radically antagonistic community that explodes into the middle of history, is what energises Milbank’s entire project. It is important to stress that this 'cri-

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4  Thomson, *Culture in a Post-Secular Context*, 91.
7  Ibid., 387.
8  Ibid., 391.
9  It also accounts for much of the ambiguity of Milbank's writing as commentators mainly fall into the trap of imagining that Milbank is writing about a muscular Church striding through history, closed-off to every other possibility or reality, or that it embodies a kind of arrogant perfection within itself. It seems to me
tique-through-practice’ is not only a negative critique, but also manifests a new way of being human, shaped around the pattern of the cross and continuing its atoning work. Here ‘mutual forgiveness and bearing of each other’s burdens becomes the modus vivendi of the Church: an ‘aton ing’ way of life. In this way Milbank radically re-interprets the doctrine of atonement in the form of concrete human practice and sociality. In his usual polemical style he goes so far as to say, ‘the Church itself, as the realized heavenly city, is the telos of the salvific process.’

It would be easy to misinterpret this ‘telos,’ viewing the Church as a closed-off system of perfected human language and culture, but this is not quite what Milbank means. The sociality of the Church is radically open-ended. As we shall see, the Church is to participate in the life of the Trinity, a life of mutuality, love and gift, but this participation is enacted as ‘the indefinite spiritual response, in time,’ which simply ‘is the Church,’ and it is this participation in mutuality, love and gift that allows an authentic sense of the self to emerge. The harmonious mutuality of the Church has no end, but is, rather, the response of the whole of humanity, even perhaps the response of the whole cosmos, to the word that God has first spoken through the Logos. Contrasted with both ‘antique virtue’ and ‘postmodern nihilism,’ that only see difference in terms of the libido dominium or as violence and threat, the Church instead embraces difference, trusting that peace rather than chaos lies at the heart of reality.

In a dense passage, Milbank takes us to the heart of his understanding of the Church as ‘counter-narrative’:

Christianity ... seeks to recover the concealed text of an original peaceful creation beneath the palimpsest of the negative distortion of dominium, through the superimposition of a third redemptive template, which corrects these distortions by means of forgiveness and atonement.

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10 Indeed, Milbank levels a devastating critique against Rene Girard that one can only discern a negative judgement (the exposure of the scapegoating mechanism in society) in his writing, and no further positive portrayal of what a new kind of community not based on arbitrary expulsion and sacrifice might look like. Interestingly Milbank suggest that this mistake emerges as Girard fails to put any emphasis at all on the practices of the Church and only focuses upon the person of Jesus himself as an exemplary individual. See Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 392ff.
11 Ibid., 397.
12 Ibid., 403.
13 Ibid., 424.
14 Ibid., 417.
Such an understanding of what the Church might be can be seen most clearly in the liturgical performance of the Easter Vigil where Old Testament passages – a kind of concealed text of original peace – are themselves read in the interpretative framework of resurrection in the light of the Easter Candle. Here an unfolding narrative is itself interrupted by a ‘third redemptive framework’ – that of cross and resurrection – which is then offered as a counter-narrative to the modern and postmodern narratives that shape contemporary life.

Even though there appears to be a triumphalistic note to some of his writing, Milbank is very aware of the failures and betrayals of the Church. Citing ‘liberalism’ and ‘nihilism’ as the Scylla and Charybdis of postmodern life, Milbank puts the blame squarely at the feet of the Church, betraying as it has the ‘excessive’ narrative which is its own foundation.

In the midst of history, the judgement of God has already happened. And either the Church enacts the vision of paradisal community which this judgement opens out, or else it promotes a hellish society beyond any terrors known to antiquity: *corruptio optimi pessima*. For the Christian irruption of history ‘decoded’ antique virtue, yet thereby helped to unleash first liberalism and then nihilism. Insofar as the Church has failed, and has become a hellish anti-Church, it has confined Christianity, like everything else, within the cycle of the ceaseless exhaustion and return of violence.15

The difficulty here is in Milbank’s assertion that the Church is to enact the vision of ‘paradisal community.’ This sounds dangerously utopian as an attempt to get behind the ambiguities of real lived-out history to a place of innocence. This is Gillian Rose’s difficulty with such a vision when she asks: ‘with Milbank’s Latinity of “sociality” and “charity,” how could “peace” bequeathed as “harmonious” arise, without acknowledging the polis intruding into such vague sociality?’16 It seems to me that Williams would present a different vision: not a paradisal community, but an endlessly forgiven one, a community shaped and reformed by judgement, confession and the crucifixion of desire. It is clear, however, that Milbank also understands the culpability of the Church, indicting it for unleashing ‘first liberalism and then nihilism’ into the Western world. Now there is no going back, but rather the postmodern turn has made new tellings and new ecclesial performances possible, happenings ‘which alone would indicate the shape of the

15 Ibid., 433.
Church that we desire.' Indeed, in positing that 'the Church is first and foremost neither a program, nor a "real" society, but instead an enacted, serious fiction,' Milbank is suggesting that the final shape of the Church's narrative is as yet unwritten and capable of radical imaginative transformation. The counter-narration is not yet at an end, and countless new ways of being Church are yet possible.

In many ways this is a generous and robust vision for the Church, a vision that Milbank contends can challenge and overthrow the various impoverished social and political visions of modernity and postmodernity. The Church appears as nothing less than a society of unlimited reciprocation, a society of friends, seeking a work of freedom which is none other than perfect social harmony, a perfect consensus in which every natural and cultural difference finds its agreed place within the successions of space and time.

It is still unclear what such 'perfection' might look like, and so the danger remains that 'without that examination of the broken middle which would show how these holy nomads arise out of and reinforce the unfreedom they prefer not to know,' such a Church would fall back into the violence it eschews. In a certain sense this Milbankian vision is an Augustinian one, defined by its interruption in history as a 'counter-narrative' of peace that relativises and interrogates every other form of human political sociality, but in another it is perhaps not Augustinian enough as Church conceived as a perfect, paradisal community runs the risk of avoiding the truthful interrogation of its own brokenness, its own complicity in violence. To 'complete' this vision I now turn to Williams where the judgement Christ embodies now cuts two ways: as an exposure of impoverished visions of the self in both society and Church.

Williams sees that the very life and narrative of the Church has been 'interrupted, disorientated, reorganized, left behind' by the activity of God, an activity that climaxes in the death and resurrection of Jesus. God's action in Christ 'interrupts our blindness and ignorance,' making us a stranger to ourselves and to our world. God confronts the self with a provocative questioning that subverts the idea that it is the centre of its own

18 Ibid., 363.
20 Rose, The Broken Middle, 284.
universe and instead allows the self to be lost and recovered in 'the interweaving patterns of a world I did not make and do not control.'\textsuperscript{22} A striking image Williams uses to portray such a God is that of the Hindu Shiva dancing in the flames, and he also points to the God of Job confronting us in the fury of a tempest. This is Buechner's 'beloved enemy,' who 'before giving us life ... demands our lives – our selves, our wills, our treasure.'\textsuperscript{23} God is 'whatever makes the world new and makes me strange to myself,'\textsuperscript{24} that which fractures the self and exposes its vulnerability. There is a double aspect to this confrontation: a confrontation within the self’s own fragile constructions, but also the alien movements of God within history. Williams locates this disruptive move first in the life of Israel and then in the life of Jesus. In \textit{Why Study the Past}, this disruptive movement is continued into the life of the Church first as resident alien, then in the confrontations of the Reformation and finally in the destabilisations of Carmelite spirituality.\textsuperscript{25} This activity is seen in the life of Israel, a history of 'disruption and suspicion ... of stubborn commitment to the finite world and their sense of their own vulnerability to history and change,' a history of exodus and exile.\textsuperscript{26} And out of these events comes Jesus who simply 'is that which interrupts and disturbs and remakes the world.'\textsuperscript{27} But the proclamation of this Jesus is not just provocation and judgement, but also a promise of love, of 'unconditional acceptance.' For those 'alive to their own vulnerability,' the judgement of Jesus is also assurance that beyond the rivalry and violence of human belonging is a deeper attention, a holding in being of the broken and exiled self. This Augustinian vision is key to Williams' understanding of the Church: it is vulnerable and questioning, a community of Beatitude. 'In the Church of the Resurrection, the darkness of the cross is a promise of love beyond our failure and cowardice and death.'\textsuperscript{28}

In \textit{The Truce of God}, Williams speaks of Jesus as a 'sign of contradiction,' an embodiment of a peace that shatters and remakes the world.\textsuperscript{29} Jesus is himself 'vulnerable to

\begin{itemize}
\item[Ibid., 121.]
\item[Williams, \textit{Open to Judgement}, 121.]
\item[\textit{Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).]
\item[\textit{Open to judgement}, 122.]
\item[Ibid.]
\item[Ibid., 123.]
\item[\textit{The Truce of God} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 69.]
\end{itemize}
the contradiction he provokes’ with the ‘crisis and dividedness’ running though his own person. And paradoxically, Jesus can only be an instrument of peace ‘when the world’s peace has been broken,’ and so Christ remains homeless, an exile wandering the world, finally pushed out onto the cross. The Church is to follow him there, as ‘a new community without the familiar barriers.’ Indeed, like Jesus, the Church can only proclaim peace ‘when it is most ready to be uneasy and constructively suspicious,’ when it too is in exile and homeless. The Church is to be ‘like a trained revolutionary cell,’ tearing up false treaties of peace and breaking up deceptive harmonies. But once more the Church has to sustain more than ‘a fixed pessimism combined with an abstract future hope.’ Just as a tension exists within Jesus, between the seriousness of tragedy and the torment of failure alongside the vision of the Kingdom and the gift of love, so also the Church must live in that tension. Christ stands in the place where world’s overlap, in which glory and misery ‘come together and interpret one another.’ Human failure and distress is not abolished by Jesus, but taken up into his life. ‘Jesus is a new world – a new creation – where earth and heaven, even hell and heaven, meet,’ and tragedy is interpreted by glory, and glory interpreted by tragedy. Jesus refuses to settle into either of these worlds, but interprets each of them. Once again ‘he refuses to belong, but creates a world for others to belong in. His homelessness creates our home, a place for us to live.’ And this home is the Church, a community made possible by the activity of Jesus. Jesus hands over to the Church ‘this crisis of passion and resurrection which is the ultimate collision between truth and falsehood, life and death.’ And it is in this tension that the Church finds its mission. Indeed, ‘the Church’s life is a perpetual Easter, and its mission the “universalizing” of Easter.’

Not simply there to offer judgement to society (although Williams speaks often about the Church ‘embodying’ a kind of judgement), the Church can also in some sense be brought back to itself through listening to the critique of culture. He goes so far as to ar-

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30 Ibid., 71.
32 Williams, The Truce of God, 72.
33 Ibid., 75.
34 Ibid., 80.
35 Ibid., 81.
36 Ibid., 82.
gue that the Church needs ‘an exposure to political and cultural issues that might help to focus doctrinal language in a new way: only so, I believe, can a theological formation be an induction into judgement – hearing it as well as mediating it.’\textsuperscript{38} Whereas for Milbank the Church exposes the poverty and failure of other narrations of human life, Williams’ understanding is more reflexive where the Church itself can be challenged and exposed in its own poverty and failure by voices beyond itself. Indeed,

receptivity to the symbol [of cross and resurrection] can involve us in hearing its judgement from those who are marginal to the Church’s symbolic life – who are, rather, marginalized by the Church’s failure to be what it sacramentally says it is, the community of gift.\textsuperscript{39}

At the heart of the life of the Church is a disruptive mystery that simply cannot be contained by its doctrines and practices, and that it is this disruptive mystery that provides the dynamics for the life of the Church. Milbank articulates something similar in his introduction to \textit{The Word Made Strange}, where it is ‘the theologian alone who must perpetuate that original making strange which was the divine assumption of human flesh,’ a kind of composing ‘of a new theoretical music.’\textsuperscript{40}

Williams explores this disruptive movement further in \textit{Why Study the Past?} where he sees Church history as a ‘making strange’ of our history and of ourselves.

The way in which we are drawn back to a fundamental question about the Church’s character as a community that has been convoqued or convened by an act independent of itself; so that we are all, in the Church, living ‘in the wake’ of something prior to all our thoughts and initiatives.\textsuperscript{41}

This ‘making strange’ is not something the Church controls, but something that it must return to again and again if it is to remain faithful to its own vision. Here Church history is taken beyond criticism and scientific study into being a mode of spiritual discipline, a ‘decentering’ exercise to ensure that our own ideologies do not get in the way of the prior act of God in Jesus Christ. It is only as we turn to the past that we understand what is strange in ourselves and can come to ‘discover more fully what we are as a commu-

\textsuperscript{38} On Christian Theology, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 40.
\textsuperscript{39} ‘Authority and the Bishop in the Church,’ in \textit{Their Lord and Ours: Approaches to Authority, Community, and the Unity of the Church}, ed. Mark Santer (London: SPCK, 1982), 109.
\textsuperscript{40} Milbank, \textit{The Word Made Strange}, 1.
\textsuperscript{41} Williams, \textit{Why Study the Past?}, 111.
nity and who we are as baptized Christians."42 Whether viewing the early Church as a ‘holy assembly of aliens,’ or the Reformation Church as recovering what it meant to be dependent on ‘God’s gratuitous action,’ or the ‘disruptive elements in Christian piety’ found in the Counter-Reformation, the lesson is the same. We find Jesus in the face of the strange and the unknown, in radically new perspectives and positions, in a truth that undermines previous certainties and identities, in ‘the divine stranger who creates a common world.’43 There is a provisionality and precariousness here that Williams places right at the heart of the life and identity of the Church.

The Surprising Newness of Orthodoxy

In his reconstruction for what is at stake in the emergence of Christian orthodoxy in the fourth century, Williams writes about the necessity to ‘move from a “theology of repetition” to something more exploratory and constructive.’44 No longer was the rejection of innovation a real option and new things needed to be said and new arguments explored. How was this ‘break in continuity’ (in this instance the upholding of the creedal homoousios) to be understood as ‘a necessary moment in the deeper understanding and securing of tradition’?45 Williams recognises that the theology of the Church has a doxological origin and the mere repetition of ancient symbol is never quite enough. Indeed, the openness, the ‘impropriety, the play of liturgical imagery’ is important as it imaginatively conceives the limits and boundaries of Christian life, and its metaphorical beginnings ‘necessarily generate new attempts to characterize those defining conditions.’46 This means that ‘Scripture and tradition require to be read in a way that brings out their strangeness, their non-obvious and non-contemporary qualities, in order that they may be read both freshly and truthfully from one generation to another.’47 Already

42 Ibid., 112.
43 Ibid., 114.
44 Arian Heresy and Tradition, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 235.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 235-36.
47 Ibid., 236.
we are gaining an understanding of orthodoxy as a dynamic and relational – almost confrontational – movement, a movement that takes time and imaginative engagement.⁴⁸

Alongside this ‘making strange’ is a ‘making difficult,’ a reckoning with complexity, so that the hard work of travelling the distance towards ancient language and thought in order to articulate them anew for ourselves. For Williams Christian orthodoxy can never simply be a repetition or recapturing of some closed-off event in history because Christian identity itself ‘is bound up with the idea of “new creation,” of an event that makes a radical, decisive and unforeseeable difference in the human world: something is brought out of nothing, life from death.’⁴⁹ More than this, the agent at work in creation and redemption is God and ‘the divine act of being is itself inseparably both an initiative and a response, generative love that is eternally generative of love.’⁵⁰ Orthodoxy is a reflection on this two-fold mystery: the cosmological disturbance of the incarnation and the dynamics of initiative and response that constitute the life of the Trinity itself. This means that the practice of orthodoxy requires a dynamic yet disciplined openness.

In *Arius*, Williams is focusing his attention on the Nicene crisis of the fourth century, but he does not see this as something ‘utterly remote,’ but rather as events that bring into sharp relief the issues and questions the church is still working through today. But it is interesting that Williams sees the anti-Nicene response as a ‘conservative’ one. While Eusebius imagines Christian history as culminating in the imperial reign of Constantine, ‘a magical solution to the Church’s unfinished business,’ in the end such an imperial *deus ex machina* could not solve the contradictions and tensions in the Church’s life, but rather what was needed, and what Williams believes is still needed, is ‘a conscious and critical reworking of its heritage,’ the hard work of theology.⁵¹ For Williams, ‘formulaic liturgical continuities’ can only be ‘guarantors of an abiding identity,’ but this is no good thing as orthodoxy must rather be radically opened out to the disturbance of the cross and the unguarded freedom and generosity of the Trinity.

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⁴⁸ For an excellent discussion of this aspect of Williams’ thought see Benjamin Myers, ‘Disruptive History: Rowan Williams on Heresy and Orthodoxy,’ in *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays*, ed. Matheson Russell (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).
⁴⁹ Williams, *Arius*, 240.
⁵⁰ Ibid., 241.
⁵¹ Ibid., 237.
Drawing a parallel between Athanasius and Barth, Williams sees both as declaring ‘that there is no gap conceivable between God as he acts towards us – as the Father of Jesus Christ – and that activity in and by which God is eternally what he is.’ Williams is bringing out a nuanced hermeneutical point here: if this disclosure of God in Jesus Christ is not just a moment or episode in the life of God, but rather shows us that what God ‘freely does he everlastingly does,’ and if this disclosure is of a God ‘who works in … vulnerability and mortality,’ then orthodoxy must also follow this dynamic and kenotic pattern. The truth it relates could never be embodied ‘by an ecclesial authority that pretends to overcome these limits.’52 ‘This is orthodoxy that is on the move into mystery, not motivated by absence or lack, but by the excess and plenitude of its own vision. It is here that Williams locates what he terms the apophatic quality of orthodoxy, and where he draws a sharp distinction between the apophatics of the Christian tradition and that of Arius or Plotinus. ‘The crucial difference’ is that for the first, negative theology is ‘bound up with a sense of intimate involvement in the life of God,’ where the second moves from a sense of ‘absolute disjunction.’ Orthodoxy is ‘a steady and endless enlarging of the heart through union in prayer and virtue with the Word, which is also a steady and endless growth in knowledge of the Father.’ For Williams this is the ‘difference made by Nicaea.’53

This means that orthodoxy can never be a ‘system that minimizes conflict or dialectic,’ a programme that ‘resists fundamental challenges,’ or else ‘an image of secure detachment and superior position.’54 It is a tool for discovery rather than control, and it is achieved – or better worked through – in community. This means that tradition is to be seen ‘as a means of access to the generative, creative events at the source of a community’s life,’ but not just ‘a highly organized set of memories, but an agenda, a project.’ Indeed,

to talk of some kind of ultimate or universal orthodoxy as if it meant possessing a theoretical perspective from which the entire human world could be viewed and decisively understood, a system with pigeon-holes for every person and situation we might ever encounter – this is in fact the ultimate ideological sclerosis.55

52 Ibid., 238-39.
53 Ibid., 243.
55 Ibid., 15-16.
Williams is surprising in his construal of orthodoxy as in contrast to heresy: the first is shown by ‘its power to illuminate and enlarge,’ an ability to question and be questioned by other thought-forms, whereas the second is to be seen only in terms of ‘a major reduction in the range of available resources of meaning.’\textsuperscript{56} Williams views orthodoxy in its double aspect: a negative aspect where ‘at its heart is the confrontation with an event, an image, which is permanently disturbing,’ but also a moment of ascent which witnesses ‘the “ascension” of a human life and death into a level of reality and speech beyond historical limitation.’\textsuperscript{57} As we have seen this movement of kenosis and ascent, dispossession and excess, loss and retrieval is a vital thread that flows through the theological writing of Williams. Here it is conceived as ‘the life-blood of any Christian orthodoxy, a training, a path, a world to inhabit, by which the historical reality of Christ’s death and resurrection are constituted the focus, the governing interpretation, of human lives; and it carries with it the conviction of a universal accessibility and a universal pertinence.’\textsuperscript{58}

Williams threads this universal pattern of kenosis and ascent into the sacramental practice of the Church. To use a Milbankian term, it is more about theurgy than theoria, the sacramental life of the Church as the community gathers to be ‘both fed and judged by the source event,’ the ‘entry into Easter, in which we have our mundane identities shattered, stretched, turned on their heads.’ Once more this double movement – betrayal and rejection and re-capitulation and calling – found in those earliest Scriptural narratives and performed each holy week and Easter are the measure of orthodoxy’s movement. Taken even further, this sacramental principle is taken into the lives of the saints themselves as every believing life becomes, in some measure, part of orthodox tradition as a ‘grammar of sanctity’ is to be shared. For Williams ‘Catholic orthodoxy lives in the continuing interplay between an ever-increasing web of image and story and a persistent critical negation.’ It is both ‘creative and imaginative’ representing an opening – out of human horizons of significance and meaning in the trust that God has shared his freedom and resource with the world. And yet it is also ‘contemplative,’ aware of its own gaps

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 20.
and failures, and the ‘destructive longing for final clarity, totality of vision, which brings forth the monsters of religious and political idolatry.’

Milbank is also interested in the surprising newness of orthodoxy, arguing for a ‘making strange’ of the Church’s doctrine and practice, a re-enabling of the authentic shock of the divine Word by ‘performing it anew, with variation.’ Milbank sees the work of the theologian – in analogy with that of the poet – as that of ‘redeeming estrangement,’ indeed, in re-presenting ‘that original making strange which was the divine assumption of human flesh.’ Here the incarnation is to be conceived again, performed again, in all its shocking disturbance. Already we have the sense that orthodoxy is not about the mere preservation of the past, or the mere repetition of ancient formulas, but a practice that connects us with the fundamental disturbance of the Christ event. More than this, Milbank imagines that this is an exilic practice, ‘since the tradition is so rarely re-performed ... today;’ but not only is this the prophetic summons of the desert eccentric, but also an orchestral performance of the whole gathered community, ‘the composing of a new theoretical music’ so that ‘the most orthodox and ancient’ may be heard with ‘the most surprise.’

Milbank argues for an ‘excessive moment’ in the development of tradition and doctrine, and this has clear affinities to what Williams terms a continuity that nevertheless has to be ‘re-imagined and recreated at each point of crisis.’ Every dimension of religious practice is fundamentally ‘performative’ for Milbank, a certain kind of mimesis (or imitative practice) that requires a certain kind of mythos (an imaginative construction of its world). This imaginative construction is central to Milbank’s thought as ‘doctrinal issues cannot be settled simply by recourse to a more exact reading of preceding practices and narratives.’ The answer to heresy is not simply ‘to repeat the narratives in a louder tone.’ Rather the formulation of doctrine requires a ‘speculative moment’ of excess, an excess that takes it beyond the constituting practice or narrative, but nonetheless confirms the truth of it. Milbank attempts to explain this excessive speculative moment

59 Ibid., 24-25.
61 Ibid.
63 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 383.
through a discussion of the incarnation. As 'disconcerting as it may appear,' argues Milbank,

one has to recognize in the doctrinal affirmation of the incarnation a radically inventive moment, which asserts the 'finality' of God's appearance in a life involving suffering and violent death, and claims also that in a certain sense God 'has to' be like this, and has not just 'incidentally' chosen this path.64

Or as Williams puts it, 'what he [God] freely does he everlastingly does.'65 This is because the doctrine asserts more than the narrative provides. Even as the narrative begins to be seen as that which judges each other story, by anticipating or enfolding it, the doctrine of the incarnation 'secures' this original Christocentrism through the 'speculative' moment of linking this life with the life of the eternal Logos. But Milbank seems to run into a problem here, for even as this speculative excess 'secures' the preceding narrative performance, it also seems to obscure it 'in favour of an “idea.”' And Milbank claims that this can be seen in the Scriptural witness itself where the 'idea of a God-become-incarnate' seems to eclipse the very particularity of these narratives.66 Whereas Williams' writings on orthodoxy consistently return tradition to its own foundational disturbance in the life of Jesus, Milbank's understanding of 'speculative excess,' stressing as it does the radical openness and innovative character of doctrine, nevertheless runs the risk of erasing the narrative performance itself in favour of an abstract idea. The Word made Strange is in danger of becoming the Word made Speculative.67 Milbank is right to focus on an ev-
er-expanding narrative:

the continuing story of the Church, already realized in a finally exemplary way by Christ, yet still to be realized universally, in harmony with Christ, and yet differently, by all generations of Christians.68

He is also right to emphasise that this on-going narrative-performance is still that of Christ, noting as he does Paul's comment about his sufferings filling up what is lacking in the suffering of Christ and Origne's more speculative understanding of the Logos suffering until the end of time. But it seems that Milbank locates this story in the wrong

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64 Ibid., 384.
65 Williams, *Arius*, 238.
66 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 384.
68 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 387.
place – ‘within a story that subsumes both [Jesus and Church].’ But if the narrative-performance belongs to Jesus – incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, the giving of the Spirit – then surely it is this story that gathers up and enfolds all others. In Milbank’s narrative it is Christ who is in danger of being engulfed by the Church, and both are in danger of being swallowed up by the speculative activity of the theologian. As R. R. Reno puts it, in Milbank, ‘the “speculative grasp” suggests a general tendency ... to substitute the creative production of theological theory for the creative power of Christ.’ I believe Milbank could counter this accusation if we see the enfolding of Jesus’ narrative not into the Church’s, not even into the speculative narrative of the theologians, but rather into the Trinitarian narrative. Here the doctrinal movement is one of both ‘creative expression’ (Logos) and ‘open interpretation’ (Spirit), a generative moment of excess that is performed perfectly by the humanity of Jesus and is worked out in the receptive life of the Church, its liturgical performances and sacramental activity. In this scheme both Jesus and the Church belong ‘from the beginning within the new narrative manifestation of God,’ and orthodoxy, in all its innovation and excess, is once again tied into the disturbance of the incarnation and the dynamics of Trinitarian expression. In the words of Sarah Coakley, ‘orthodoxy is no mere creedal correctness, no imposed ecclesiastical regulation,’ but rather is ‘a project, the longed-for horizon of personal transformation in response to divine truth.’ If such a vision opens orthodoxy out to an eschatological horizon and sets tradition on the move into an ever expanding world of depth and encounter, it also opens out its ascetic horizon in the struggle of the self and community to ‘perform’ better the kenosis of the cross and the excess of resurrection.

The Church: Gift, Sacrament and Sign

In *Being Reconciled* Milbank extends his formulation of a cultural theology in terms of a consideration of gift, arguing that:

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69 Ibid.
The notion of a participation of the poetic in an infinite poesis is to be complimented by the notion of a participation of reciprocal exchanges in an infinite reciprocity which is the divine donum.\textsuperscript{72}

He contends that 'for theology there are no "givens," only "gifts,"
and
that gift presupposes relationship and participates in the life of the Trinity itself.

Gift is an exchange as well as an offering without return, since it is asymmetrical reciprocity and non-identical repetition. Because gift is gift-exchange, participation of the created gifts in the divine giver is also participation in a Trinitarian God.\textsuperscript{73}

Milbank develops his understanding of gift by responding to Marcel Mauss' seminal work\textsuperscript{74} and in critical dialogue with Derrida, Marion and others. Here I will chart this development in terms of his analysis of ancient and (post)modern understandings of gift; reciprocity and non-identical repetition; gifts as 'social transcendental' and the church as 'the cosmopolis of gift exchange'; and the failure of theologies of gift and the 'impossible' society.

Milbank suggests that 'it is arguable that "giving" is just as "transcendental" a term as "being," and that 'it is redundant to assume that things are apart from their capacity to give themselves.'\textsuperscript{75} Whereas 'for Mauss, generosity precedes contract,'\textsuperscript{76} Milbank discerns in most contemporary writing on gift that 'the cleavage between gift and contract' embodies 'a relatively strong modern distinction between the private and public spheres of life,'\textsuperscript{77} and asks the question, 'how can gift exchange be at once the golden mean and at the same time something destined to be put in its proper place by contract?'\textsuperscript{78} Two responses to Mauss are significant for Milbank. The Marxist Pierre Bordieu and philosopher Jacques Derrida.

Bourdieu argues provocatively that the 'appearance' of gift in ancient and modern societies only serves to mask 'what is at bottom a nakedly contractual and usurious reality,' where at the heart of all systems of production and exchange lies 'a purely economic,

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., xi.
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{The Future of Love}, 352.
\textsuperscript{77} "Can a Gift Be Given," 122.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 128.
material and self-interested force that drives the system.”

Milbank rejects the universality of Bourdieu’s analysis, arguing first that ‘it assumes, without warrant, that economic self-interest in a sense only defined and produced by capitalism, is everywhere fundamental,’ and that ‘for local societies, joy in festive giving, delivering at once a sense of power and feeling of connectedness with others, may be itself the final goal.’ In this way Milbank questions the ubiquity of capitalist understandings of contract and gift. For Derrida, on the other hand, for the gift to exist there must be no reciprocity, no return, exchange, counter-gift or debt. This is because a gift ceases to be a gift if it is brought into systems of exchange, of economics, markets, closed systems, contracts and law. Derrida imagines such ‘exchanges’ as a vicious circle closing in and around the gift. Milbank summarises Derrida’s own view:

> for there to be a pure free gift, there would have to be no donating subject, no receiving subject, and no gift-object transferred. A true gift would be from no-one, to no-one and of nothing.

This means that ‘for Derrida, there is no human gift, while to be human is to be haunted by the possibility of giving the real gift which cannot be given.’

Against both Bourdieu and Derrida, Milbank asserts that it is possible ‘to defend exchange, and so the reality of the gift.’ Rejecting ‘that modern purism about the gift which renders it unilateral,’ he suggests that such a view disconnects the gift from any impulse that actually constitutes it as such. First from ‘any kind of desire to be with the recipient of your love,’ second disconnecting it from ‘justice’ (or the giving the other their due), and finally severing it ‘from power, or the inescapable persuasion of the other involved in every offering.’ And to counter Bourdieu, Milbank asserts that ‘delay and non-identical repetition need not be functions of an obfuscatory and self-serving strategy,’ but might, instead, reflect ‘the necessarily creative self-expression of the genuine giver.’

79 Ibid., 129.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 130.
82 Ibid., 131.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid., 132.
It is in this context that Milbank sees Marion as ‘getting it exactly half right’ in his development of a phenomenology of the gift.\(^ {85}\) Such a phenomenology rightly emphasises ‘distance,’ but makes the mistake of only emphasising distance, ‘and not the transference and content-filled “in-between” which alone makes that distance.’\(^ {86}\) The difficulty with Marion’s ‘divine giving,’ according to Milbank, is that it remains ‘indifferent also to the content of its gift, since it does not give out of an infinite plenitude of existing possession … but rather gives only giving, the pure gesture.’ This means that in the end it is nothing but ‘a hypostasization of a modern, free, post-Cartesian, capitalist and “pure” gift … indifferent to content … or to relation and reciprocity.’\(^ {87}\) Milbank takes a contrary position, arguing that:

Instead, divine giving occurs inexorably, and this means that a return is inevitably made, for since the creature’s very being resides in its reception of itself as a gift, the gift is, in itself, the gift of a return.\(^ {88}\)

Marion’s ‘gift without being is not a gift “of” anything, and so is not a gift,’ leaving Milbank to assert that

an absolutely pure giving, outside all motivations of self-pleasing, all return of self to self, and all expectation of any sort of return from the other, is more radically and coherently conceived in terms of an impersonal nihil.\(^ {89}\)

It seems that Marion has been playing on Derrida’s terms, and on those terms he loses.

Rather than pursuing the spectre of ‘pure gift,’ Milbank argues that ‘gift is interpersonal’ and that ‘to give one must already be responding and must already be in a relation of exchange.’\(^ {90}\) Gift, it seems, ‘is always a moment within gift-exchange.’ Following Mauss, he sees gift as ‘the social transcendental’ where the social process is gift-exchange, but he combines this with an understanding that this social process is enfolded and authorised by ‘an exchange with the divine,’\(^ {91}\) where this exchange is not merely ‘social or cultural at all, but to be an aspect of a cosmic ecology: a vast circulation encompassing

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\(^{86}\) Milbank, “Can a Gift Be Given,” 133.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 134.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 135.

\(^{89}\) Ibid., 143.

\(^{90}\) *The Future of Love*, 356.

\(^{91}\) Ibid., 359.
natural beings, the gods, and the ancestors.\textsuperscript{92} In this way, 'gift-exchange as the social transcendental is like a natural anticipation in all human societies of the society of supernatural grace.'\textsuperscript{93} Here we begin to see the Church as nothing less than 'the attempt to erect a cosmopolis on the basis of a universal gift-exchange,'\textsuperscript{94} and we can see how Milbank can claim that the Church subsumes the whole of life within its activity, for it is only in the counter-narrative of the Church that it becomes clear 'that gift is the social transcendental; that the social process as such is gift-exchange' and that this is 'nothing less than the Holy Spirit as gift, or the bond of reciprocal loving union between Father and Son.'\textsuperscript{95} Not only is the life of the Church seen as an incarnation of the Spirit,\textsuperscript{96} but Milbank elevates its significance beyond the political and the social into the cosmic itself. The 'cosmopolis' of which he speaks is nothing less than the celestial vision of a restored universe gathered together around Christ. This understanding of the gift is anchored in 'the realisation of a perpetual exchange between the Father and the Son' which is the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{97} This endless divine exchange, which is the Trinitarian God, is 'beyond any ontic contrast between giving and receiving ... where the generating Father is himself “consummated” by the Son, or is, reversely “constituted” by him.'\textsuperscript{98} This 'internal' and 'immanent' Trinity is mirrored by an 'external' movement of the Spirit, first poured out into creation 'as the rebound of gratitude,' and then into the life of the Church itself as an 'ethical exchange through time.'\textsuperscript{99}

Milbank understands the Church to find itself 'on the site of the Eucharist.' Here presence is suspended 'in favour of memory and expectation,' where each are positioned as those who are fed – 'gift from God of ourselves and therefore not to ourselves – and bizarrely assimilates us to the food which we eat, so that we, in turn, must exhaust ourselves as nourishment for others.'\textsuperscript{100} It is at this Eucharistic 'site' that humanity is capable of being incorporated into the perpetual bestowal of gifts that takes place within the

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 353.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 360.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 359.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 359, 61.
\textsuperscript{96} \textit{The Word Made Strange}, 162.
\textsuperscript{97} \textit{Being Reconciled}, x.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 239.
\textsuperscript{100} \textit{The Future of Love}, 134.
Trinity, and authentic human identity can emerge. As Catherine Pickstock puts it, there is no ‘moment before, beyond or without gift.’\textsuperscript{101} Indeed, the story of the Church is located in the endless repetition of this gift, both in its fullness and in its failure. It is possible to discern some tension here between a radical openness to the ‘gift’ in terms of hospitality, welcome, gratitude and forgiveness, and a dangerously closed system where only the Church embodies this reality.\textsuperscript{102} To return to Pickstock for a moment, ‘to be within the gift, to give or receive at all, is to be within peaceful perfection, to reside within the Trinity.’\textsuperscript{103} However, we are not to see this as a reduction of life into a narrowly confined ecclesial reality, but rather as an expanding ever outwards into the universal community that is the Church and into the abundance and generosity of the life of God itself.\textsuperscript{104}

But, Milbank asks,

\begin{quote}
if gift-exchange is the social transcendental, how today do we live in denial of this by splitting gift-exchange between private unilateral gift on the one hand, and ungenerous, purely self-interested contract on the other? Secondly, how has Christianity been complicit in this formation of a kind of anti-society?\textsuperscript{105}
\end{quote}

He argues that ‘transcendental gift-exchange was theologically undone’ as from the late Middle Ages divine and human activity were set over against each other. By the time of the reformers, ‘the divine act of grace was seen as more emphatically unilateral … less an act of divine friendship than one of arbitrary election.’\textsuperscript{106} This meant that

\begin{quote}
in imitation of divine absolute arbitrary sovereignty, human rule starts to get construed in terms of formal entitlement rather than intrinsic justice, while the market is handed over entirely to contractual calculation, free of any reciprocal obligations.\textsuperscript{107}
\end{quote}

In all of this, ‘the loss of transcendental gift-exchange is the result of a heterodox Christian development’ which has lead to the emergence of an ‘impossible’ society, a ‘simulacrum’ of the Church that ‘unites us all only by bonds of contract which seek to make one egois-

\textsuperscript{102} See Shakespeare, \textit{Radical Orthodoxy}, 81ff.
\textsuperscript{103} Pickstock, \textit{After Writing}, 250.
\textsuperscript{104} I would propose a Milbankian vision of a Celestial Church, a universal reality where all of humanity and even the whole of creation can find a home. Is this a hope he shares with Origin, Gregory of Nyssa and Hans Urs von Balthasar, the vision of \textit{apocatastasis}, of the restoration of all things to their original condition?
\textsuperscript{105} Milbank, \textit{The Future of Love}, 361.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 362.
tic desire match with another – without friendship, generosity, or concern for the whole social organism.\textsuperscript{108} It seems that failed theology has lead to a dangerous and abusive context where the ‘society of friends’ has given way to the contractual technologies of control.

If Milbank’s understanding of gift takes shape around his Augustinian focus on \textit{donum}, the gift of the Spirit and the life of the Trinity, then Williams explores the sacramental life of the Church through a complimentary Augustinian emphasis on \textit{signum}. And if Milbank locates this theory of gift in the \textit{excessive} movements of the Spirit, Williams locates his understanding of the sacraments in the \textit{kenotic} movement of the cross. I have already explored Augustine’s use of \textit{signum} and Williams’ interpretation of this in chapter two.

In this schema, God alone is the end of human desire and meaning and there is no fixed or closed meaning to be found in the world. Williams sees Augustine as arguing that ‘the life, death and resurrection of Jesus … are \textit{signum} in a unique sense,’\textsuperscript{109} inasmuch as they unsettle all fixed and stable meanings that are not finally orientated towards the divine. In this way the cross exposes the emptiness of all meaning for things \textit{in themselves} and itself paradoxically becomes the sign of God’s activity in the world. Williams’ understanding of the sacramental activity of the Church is to be understood in its relationship to this sign, the sign of the cross.

In “Sacraments of the New Society,” Williams describes sacramental acts as marking ‘a transition from one sort of reality to another.’\textsuperscript{110} Rejecting bland understandings of the sacramental as arising out of a kind of creation theology where the material discloses something of the divine presence, Williams instead sees sacramental activity as ‘a process of estrangement, surrender and re-creation.’\textsuperscript{111} Sacraments re-order our words and images so that patterns of human social belonging are subverted and re-constructed, so that fixed and stable identities are exposed for the fictive creations that they are. More than this, sacraments deconstruct any sense of neutrality in the human self’s orientation to its world, instead re-casting it as ‘a place of loss or need.’\textsuperscript{112} The self is here mobilised

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} \textit{On Christian Theology}, 209.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 210.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 209.
in terms of its journey from loss to recovery. Sacraments perform aspects of a single story – a repetition-in-difference of the death and resurrection of Jesus – where the shape and meaning of his life become the shape and meaning of the self’s life also. In baptism, for example, the infant is enfolded into a narrative of ‘transition and rescue,’ where their ‘natural’ condition is re-imagined in terms of ‘danger or unfreedom.’ This first narrative – of incorporation into the death of Christ, itself ‘the “death” of the child’s existing human identity’ – is then enfolded into another, ‘the “grafting” into a new reality,’ Christ’s resurrection.113 Neither moment depend on education or choice, but is rather ‘a gift bestowed,’ and so baptism comes to be about solidarities we do not create for ourselves, a kind of double immersion first into the dangerous limitations of this world, but also into the endlessness of God. Indeed, ‘everything about the rite seems to push choice to the margins.’114 Baptism becomes about a death to systems of ‘malfunctioning instinct and desire,’ systems that seeks an end to desire, a termination in the here and now that can only be ‘a kind of death,’ and a life open to new possibilities, endless new relationships without borders or boundaries.

Williams understands baptism as emphasising that Christian sociality is not predicated on common culture, aims or co-operation, but rather on our corporate relation to God. As he argues elsewhere, this emphasis of baptism means two things. First, that ‘the body of every other individual is related to its maker and saviour before it is related to any human system of power.’115 And second, that the body finds itself ‘in a relation of mutuality according to which each becomes the bearer of necessary gifts to the other.’116 Baptism breaks open systems of rivalry and suspicion to the ‘indiscriminate regard of God.’ This means that the new desires that replace that of old human identities are ‘desires free from competitive patterns of rivalry,’ where the ‘fundamental compatibility and interdependence’ of each can be rightly affirmed.117

Williams sees the sacrament of the Eucharist in similar terms of disturbance and transition. The Eucharist recollects an already ‘doubled’ narrative: that of Jesus’ taking

113 Ibid., 210.
114 Ibid., 211.
116 Ibid., 156.
117 On Christian Theology, 213.
of bread and wine as a sign of his coming death. The movement is this time one of lack of trust towards a action of covenant. But, suggests Williams, this movement is itself dependent upon another transition as 'Jesus "passes over" into the symbolic forms by his own word and gesture, a transition into the vulnerable and inactive forms of the inanimate world.'118 In this way, Jesus hands himself over as 'a thing, to be handled and consumed.'119 What Williams describes as the most disturbing element in this is that the movement into community is only made possible by 'Christ passing from action into passion,' in which 'the act of new creation is an act of utter withdrawal.'120 Williams sees this sacramental withdrawal as hinting that the creative act itself is more to be seen as an act of dispossession rather than an act of dominance or control. Jesus' giving himself over to his disciples in the form of bread and wine anticipates his being given over in betrayal, and so he 'binds himself to vulnerability before he is bound (literally) by human violence.'121 Those at table with Christ are 'frustrated as betrayers' as their victim does their job for them. 'By his surrender "into" the passive forms of food and drink he makes void and powerless the impending betrayal, and, more, makes the betrayers his guests and debtors.'

Jesus' relinquishing of power paradoxically enables him to shape the entire narrative as betrayers and deserters are transformed into guests. Once more there is the sense that the community (the Church) is created and bound together not by particular negotiations or contracts but the prior act of God towards it in Jesus, and this becomes the guarantee of the Church's hospitality and welcome.

The other becomes the object of love and trust because 'invited' by God, and so, in some sense, trusted by God. God's promise to be faithful, even in advance of betrayal, points towards a community whose bonds are capable of surviving betrayal, and which thus can have no place for reprisal, for violent response to betrayal and breakage, or for pre-emptive action to secure against betrayal.122

The Church is called to be a defenseless society.

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118 Ibid., 215.
119 Ibid., 216.
120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid., 217.
Williams also sees here an insight into materiality as the material creation can itself ‘appear as the sign of a divine renunciation.’ The material world in its integrity and very distance from the divine effects this purpose, rather than some kind of unilateral control or intervention. Materiality becomes a kind of sign of ‘a creativity working by the renunciation of control,’ and so the things of this world are not to become tools of power in the contests of one agent against another.

The eucharist hints at the paradox that material things carry their fullest meaning for human minds and bodies … when they are the medium of gift, not instruments of control or objects for accumulation.

Matter gains significance when it is understood not as a mere object, but rather as a carrier of attention and respect. This means that the Church needs to become a community of solidarity in which ‘sacramental practice’ is to ‘speak most clearly of loss, dependence and interdependence’ and of ‘solidarities we do not choose.’ Not so much Milbank’s hyper-activity of gift – though this is still important – but more of a spiritual discipline in which the very fragility of the Church’s witness speaks of divine initiative and gift.

The Bishop: Theurgic Practitioner and Kenotic Witness

In his explorations on ecclesiology and the role of the bishop, Milbank quotes Marion’s ‘the bishop is the true theologian’ with approval. For Milbank this statement articulates the ‘vital link’ between theology and Eucharist where the bishop is the Eucharistic celebrant and the interpreter of the Word, holding together the twin foci of the Church: Word and sacrament. Milbank sees the danger of certain forms of ecclesial authoritarianism lurking here, but believes they can be avoided by a retrieval of a medieval episcopal vision. In such a vision the ‘mystical’ once more regains its focus in the liturgical, the ‘mysteries of initiatory passage, participation and ascent,’ and theoria once more becomes theurgy. Alongside this melding of the mystical and the liturgical, the relationship between the sacramental and ecclesial bodies also needs to be recovered, no longer

123 Ibid.
124 Ibid., 218.
125 Ibid., 219.
126 Milbank, Being Reconciled, 123.
allowing them to become antagonistic sites of rival authority as has largely become the case as the Church has moved from a liturgical to a more legal framework. Milbank sees such a recovered vision articulated in Catherine Pickstock’s *After Writing* in which the Church is imagined as receiving its identity in the Eucharist. Rather than a ‘closed self-governing entity’ it receives its ‘very social embodiment from outside of itself.’ Milbank follows Pickstock in understanding transubstantiation less about substance and more as ‘a dynamic action of divine self-giving,’ a movement that gathers the elements of the ecclesial body itself.

Milbank argues that this theurgic vision – in which the past really is made present through the liturgical Eucharistic performance, and the future is opened out by the movements of the Spirit – has largely been lost in contemporary understandings of the Church. This paradoxically means that there is an increase in the stress on clerical authority both as ‘the privileged interpreters of the Word,’ and also as the ‘guarantor of a Eucharistic miracle,’ now more a spectacle than a relational giving of the body of the Church. Milbank works towards the re-imagination of the bishop as theurgic practitioner by refashioning an understanding of hierarchy: not a hierarchy focused on ‘synchronic spatiality’ (a vision too modern for Milbank), but rather a hierarchical movement through history and one that is focused in a ‘specific locality.’ This means that the role of the bishop is constituted in a three-fold context, which Milbank categorises in terms of history, archaeology and geography. Thus the bishop ministers within a living history, transmitted liturgically; through its rootedness in a particular sacred space (the *cathedra*) and in its gathering of the people into unity.

Milbank turns to Nicholas of Cusa to ‘complete’ his vision. Making use of the *De Condordantia Catholica*, Milbank sees Cusa as bridging the ecclesial and experiential through the liturgical – once again the mystical does not denote an individualistic ‘spirituality’ in opposition to ecclesial structures, but rather is to be located in the liturgical life of all its members. Cusa makes use of the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius (just as Milbank does) and in particular his understanding of hierarchy. As I stressed in chapter two, this

127 Pickstock, *After Writing*.
128 Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 123.
129 Ibid., 124.
130 Ibid., 125.
hierarchy is no mere static order; indeed, Cusa ‘returns to earlier high medieval mystical
and educative notions of hierarchy, and out of these notions themselves generates new
democratic theses.’\textsuperscript{131} At the heart of this newly articulated hierarchy is an Augustinian
\textit{discors condordia}, a peaceful harmony which is eschatological gift, the dynamic harmo-
ny of the cosmos which is now anticipated in the activity of the reconciling Church.
‘Doctrine,’ therefore ‘is about nothing but the giving of divine \textit{condordantia} in the Cre-
ation and its restoration through the Incarnation and the Church, which is the arrival of
reconciliation.’\textsuperscript{132} If this focus opens up the bishop’s ministry to an enlarging democratic
principle that takes note of time and history, then the focusing of his ministry in the
cathedra is not a representation of a frozen distillation of power, but rather becomes a
salve against the closure that the emerging sovereign state and later liberal democra-
cy would soon place around a specific, often ‘national’ community.\textsuperscript{133} Here the whole
Church without boundary is nevertheless gathered in \textit{this} particular place around the
bishop. The bishop can never be a static icon, but is rather ‘poised between the always
arriving order of signs and the consensus of the people.’ But more than this, the bishop is
an excessive sign of ‘the original \textit{condordantia} of the whole cosmos,’ a relational harmony
participating in the ‘consensus of the Trinity.’\textsuperscript{134} The Dionysian echoes are clear.

Williams’ discussions on the role of the bishop combine a similar stress on the liturgi-
cal with a clearer alignment with the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Williams once more
takes us to the cross where, ‘the paschal events are a record of death and resurrection,
utter emptiness issuing in fullness, life out of nothing.’\textsuperscript{135} The Church both hides and re-
veals this mystery, and its sacramental life is a sign of contradiction in the world, where
God’s power is to be seen in human weakness. The Church’s sacramentality is nothing
less than ‘its capacity to dispossess itself and to be transparent to its root in the divine
self-giving.’\textsuperscript{136} All this feels rather different to Milbank’s theurgic understanding whereby
human creativity is bestowed with divine power. Though radically open to the act of God

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{135} Rowan Williams, “The Church as Sacrament,” \textit{International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church} 10,
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 8.
in Christ, there is no moment where this divine action is not already intertwined with the human. There is no pure sacramental sphere of life, but it is only in the sacramental act that the Church is able to see itself as it really is.

Not simply by offering a glimpse of transformed reality but by showing how the fragmented pieces of human history, individual and corporate, can be drawn together around a promise that is fleshed out in the Cross and Resurrection.137

In "Authority and the Bishop in the Church," Williams sees authority as necessary to living in a shared world where possibilities are limited. Authority is about action, analogous to an authoritative reading of a text or performance of a play. Significantly for Williams, this means that the exercise of authority must be of a piece with the goals of the community in which it is active, it cannot subvert its own credibility and must embody the social goals that it is striving for. The Church, then, requires authority of a particular kind. Once again it is the paschal mystery that makes the corporate life of the Church possible as 'the ultimate and decisive symbol of undefeated compassion and inexhaustible creative resource.'138 This means that cross and resurrection 'constitute an authoritative reality,' a reality in which violent power is judged and mutuality and gift are shown to be God’s way in the world. This means that every expression of authority in the Church needs to be cruciform also. The authority of the Church is, for Williams, 'the authority of the symbol,'139 and so the bishop’s authority lies in her relationship to this symbol. This means that the teaching authority of the bishop lies in their Eucharistic presidency.

Catholicity for Williams means 'an incorporation of the many into the one, the individual into the communal, the local into the universal,'140 an incorporation only made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The bishop is not to be seen as the guardian of a sacred order, or the dispenser of truth which would only generate a sense of 'the empowered and initiated over against the uninstructed.' This is because it is the paschal symbol alone that brings the Church into being, and only the whole Church can finally carry its meaning. The bishop’s authority is 'an authority to unify,' not to manage

137 Ibid., 9.
138 'Authority and the Bishop,' 94.
139 Ibid., 95.
140 Ibid., 96.
uniformity or bland conformity, but rather to interpret the giftedness of each to all in the community. The bishop’s ministry therefore becomes one of a kenotic ‘making space’ for the other. Such a kenotic ministry allows as far as possible a ‘mutual openness in the Church,’ in which hostility is transformed into gift, and where ‘the face of strangers or opponents in the Church’ are shown to be ‘Christ’s face for each other.’

Nikolaos Loudovikos is a useful conversation partner to engage here as in a sense he combines what I have been imagining as the kenotic and theurgic elements in the role and activity of the bishop. For Loudovikos, the bishop

is not an individual clothed in authority or the center of an institutional structure, but the first of the presbyters, as a stimulus and foundation of the absolute participation (koinonia) in Christ of all the Church’s charisms, which belong to Christ, not the bishop.

It is important to note that the emphasis placed here on ‘participation’ and ‘charism’ (what might be termed the theurgic), is linked by Loudovikos to the shape of ministry that the bishop has, that of a kenotic participation in the mind of Christ (the allusions to the Philippians hymn are striking). Hence the bishop ‘is the first minister of ecclesial unity in terms of self-sacrifice and self-emptying (kenosis)’ and it is this self-emptying that constitutes the bishop’s eschatological ‘primacy,’ a ‘primacy of crucifixion and of ministry “girded with a towel.”’ It is this kenotic unity with Christ that enables the bishop’s charismatic unity with the Church. There is for Loudovikos no sense of any individual possession of a charism here, but rather ‘the opening up of the “individual” charism to the catholic.’

The ‘charisms’ or gifts of the Spirit, made available to the Church as the body of Christ, are exercised by its individual members, and so ‘each charism is thus a particular mode of eucharistic participation in the body of Christ, which implies a mode of participation in the whole Christ.’ Still, this does not mean that the individual is subsumed into the

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141 Ibid., 108.  
142 Ibid., 99.  
144 Ibid., 27-28.  
145 Ibid., 24.  
147 Ibid., 51.
whole, rather 'this specific charism renders him or her an unrepeatabble and particular presence of Christ by grace in the Church.'\textsuperscript{148} There are real similarities here to Milbank’s understanding of gift as a repetition-in-difference. But always this theurgic participation in the giftedness of the Spirit is opened out by the particular ministry of the bishop: ‘the bishop’s charism is that which, like Christ, first motivates the cross-bearing accommodation of the others, guiding all the others, in consequence, toward the same goal.’\textsuperscript{149}

The participatory sharing of gifts is at the same time a kenotic opening out to the other, and it is the bishop that focusses this Christological and charismatic movement, but only insomuch as they ‘share the same mind as Christ.’ It is in the role of the bishop as they focus and orient all the other ministries of the Church, argues Loudovikos, that the \textit{kenotic} and \textit{theurgic} gain their central significance.

**The Church and the Self: Cross and Glory**

Both Williams and Milbank give sophisticated understandings of the Church in terms of its reliance on the prior act of God in Jesus Christ, and of it existing as human culture; as a community of practice made possible by cross and resurrection. Both imagine the life of the Church as the life of the Spirit, an incorporation into the life of the Trinity, but with Milbank this results in a superabundant life of creative charity, where the Church becomes an ‘out-narration’ of all other forms of human belonging and sociality, whereas for Williams this results in a kenotic dispossession of power as the Church makes God known through its cruciform existence. Milbank sees the sacramental life of the Church in terms of a joyful ‘repetition-in-difference’ of God’s endless creativity, whereas for Williams it is marked once more by a humble truthfulness of vision where human failure and betrayal can be taken up into the welcoming and forgiving embrace of Christ. In this last section I want to tie these two visions of plenitude and loss together through a reflection on Williams’ epiphanic understanding of the Church whereby glory and loss are brought together.

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 52.

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 96.
Williams argues that the Church is not a system of ideas or doctrines, but rather ‘it is first and foremost the epiphany of God’s action ... it exists to radiate the glory of God.’\textsuperscript{150} In \textit{Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel}, Williams extends this epiphanic understanding, writing that ‘the believing community manifests the risen Christ: it does not simply talk about him, or even ’celebrate‘ him. It is the place where he is shown.’\textsuperscript{151} For Williams, the message of the Church is ‘an invitation to see, and so depends on a basic metaphor of unveiling and showing.’\textsuperscript{152} This is the stereoscopic vision of the cross, at once judgement and yet also inexhaustible gift. Williams takes inspiration for his stress on seeing from John’s gospel where Jesus and the Church are a light in the world, a light that confronts and confounds its darkness, and from Paul’s emphasis on \textit{mysterion}: the cross as an apocalyptic showing forth of God’s purpose. For Williams this showing ‘is an effective, catalytic and transforming event which draws new boundaries,’ the tearing open of the heavens in Mark’s version of the baptism of Christ. What is of decisive importance for Williams is that it is the paschal event itself that shows God’s activity in the world, and paradoxically it is only as the community as a whole in its sacramental life and ethical practice points away from itself to the cross that it comes to show forth the life and action of God in the world.

In his language of epiphany and showing, Williams draws deeply from the Orthodox Tradition. Orthodoxy embodies a mystical vision for the Church where she participates in the abundant outflowing of Trinitarian life, and where ‘the splendor of the eternal glory’ can be discerned ‘beneath the outward aspect of humiliation and weakness.’\textsuperscript{153} Salvation is understood as inherently social. The Church is seen as ‘a living model of renewed social relationships depending upon renewed relationship with God.’\textsuperscript{154} Only as a community can the Church manifest the life of Christ, not as a loose collection of individuals. The Orthodox tradition understands that the essence of Christianity is not some abstract theory, but a way of life. It displays Christ in its liturgies, rituals and sacramental practice. As Theo Hobson suggests, Eastern Orthodoxy enabled for Williams

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\textsuperscript{150} Rowan Williams, \textit{Anglican Identities} (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), 93.
\textsuperscript{151} \textit{Resurrection}, 56.
\textsuperscript{152} ‘Authority and the Bishop,’ 94.
\textsuperscript{153} Lossky, \textit{The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church}, 245.
\textsuperscript{154} Rowan Williams, Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 233.
\end{flushright}
'a new conceptualization of the church as a Spirit-filled cultural phenomenon.' But if in Orthodoxy the glory of God is to be seen beneath and beyond the Church’s weakness, Williams’ understanding of the Church’s epiphanic nature takes a very different nuance. Following Ramsey, Williams works to capture the full paradox of glory and cross, arguing that the glory of God is shown precisely by the Church’s kenotic participation in the cross of Christ. Indeed, there is in fact no easy cross-over between the wisdom of human culture and the wisdom of God, for the simple reason that God’s wisdom is made plain only in the Cross ... in that event humanity is shown to be, and enabled to be, the mirror of divine life.

The Gospel of John’s intimate linkage of glory with the crucifixion of Jesus is decisive for both Williams’ and Ramsey’s ecclesiologies. In the gospel Jesus’ journey towards the cross is an unveiling of his glory, a glory that the Spirit equips the Church to share. Williams sees this as an articulation of ‘the “other-directedness” of Jesus’ vision,’ in which all Jesus is is given by the Father and all he sees the Father doing, he does. The cross is the climax of Jesus’ obedience to this pattern and so the moment he is most receptive to the glory given by the Father. As Williams puts it, ‘on the cross, he has nothing of his own: he “hands over his spirit” and becomes wholly transparent to the divine presence and action in that moment of self-dispossession.’ The disciples, and therefore the Church, are called to share in this glory by sharing in divine ‘self-negation.’ For Williams and Ramsey, sharing in glory is ‘the outworking in finite form of the eternal self-yielding, self-hiding we might almost say, of the Son before the Father, the Son who does not will to be “visible” except as the living act of the Father.’ Here is God then,

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155 Hobson, Anarchy, Church and Utopia, 19.
158 Ibid.
159 Ibid.
160 Ibid., 181.
such a God cannot be conceived as an eternal individual self, but as a life lived eternally in that ‘investment’ in the other.\textsuperscript{161} 

The self begins to refract the glory of God as it trusts itself to this movement of decentering and dispossession, where the cross as an ‘event whose “Centre” is an eternal and infinite stripping of self’ comes to be seen as ‘the inner logic of God’s life’ and so as the eternal pattern for its own.\textsuperscript{162} Once more following Ramsey, Williams draws all of this back into the life of the Church. Now the failings and betrayals of the Church are to be read in a theological context: that God can choose to be there also, in the ‘Godlessness of the Church,’ reinforces ‘the paschal freedom of God to be where love insists on being, in the depths of what is other.’\textsuperscript{163} Once more the Trinitarian fullness of being is only to be seen in a kenotic outpouring of love. What seems clear from Williams’ writing is that these two movements – the ecstatic joy of the Trinity, and the descent into a world of culture and meaning, contradiction, suffering, sin and pain – are mysteriously one and the same.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have been examining the Church as ‘an arena for the soul’ in the work of Milbank and Williams. The idea of the soul takes us back to chapter one in which contemporary narratives of the self – in which difference can only be imagined as conflict and the fragmented self can only be situated in a context of suspicion – undermined any idea of the ‘soul’ as constructed (in time and community) and yet gifted. The constructions of the self and its giftedness were seen in chapter two and three in the self’s orientation towards the divine in infinite desire, in its reconfiguring of time as gift and not just exile, and in its poetic shaping of its world though culture, language and community. This orientation of the self towards God was a movement upwards and outwards in poetic ascent, but also a movement of dispossession as the self is found in its costly negotiations with others.

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 182. 
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 183. 
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 185.
Both Milbank and Williams contend that the Church is an experimental community, a sign of the new humanity in which the self and its world can be re-imagined beyond violence, rivalry, suspicion and stasis. Both stress what Milbank calls the ‘fictive’ qualities of the Church, that it an artificial construct, a cultural production of language, performance and sign. In this way the Church mobilises desire and sets the self on a dynamic relational journey – one of kenosis and ascent – as language and identity is shattered and re-made through its liturgical and ethical performance. Milbank contends that the Church reaches towards the divine in its collective imaginings of a new identity and community, and so that its activity – its form as culture – comes to be seen as configured by gift: the gift of Logos and Spirit in the pattern of Trinitarian life. And if Milbank stresses this forward movement, Williams also emphasises the ecclesial journey of the self through sacrament and sign, but this time it is the disturbance of the cross that provides its pattern, a disturbance that is itself the sign of the kenotic movements of the Trinity.

The Church as ‘an arena for the soul’ is both kenotic and poetic. I have explored this double movement in four aspects of the life of the Church. First as its narrative practice interrupts and subverts impoverished notions of the self and its world, mobilising desire through a transition from loss to recovery and a reflexive judgement located in the crucified Jesus. Then I explored how the language of the Church – its dogmatic articulations of truth – take the form of dispossession and the discovery of excess. Next I showed how the activity of the Church disturbs and reshapes the self, moving it from contractual and alienated relations, conflictual assertions and static constructions to an articulation of loss and gift. The self is here reconfigured in terms of divine hospitality and unconditional welcome. In the final section I considered the role of the bishop in terms of kenosis and theurgy in which the bishop reflects the life of the Church back to itself. This reflecting action is one of dispossession – as each makes way for the giftedness of the other – and reciprocity – as this ‘making way’ enables the community’s performance-in-difference of the excessive relational dynamics of Trinitarian life. This is the Church as ‘an arena of the soul,’ a community of sacrament and sign that reshapes the self as kenosis and gift.

In this experimental community the self and its constructions of its world are restructured beyond rivalry, conflict, contract and betrayal, beyond autonomy and stasis, in a performance of a new cultural poetics in terms of reciprocity and dispossession. In the
final chapter I will show how these movements of the self – its kenosis and ascent – are a participation in and an anticipation of the life of God itself: the costly displacements of Trinitarian love and the abundant excesses of divine relationality.
Infinite Displacement, Infinite Ascent: The Kenotic and Theurgic Self

In this chapter I will explore how Williams’ and Milbank’s understandings of the self generate an exciting confluence in the areas of desire, cultural ‘making’ and Trinitarian dynamics. I will chart how these visions come together in an endless kenosis and ascent where the self dynamically moves towards a ‘fully harmonious “culture” in which nature has attained its purpose of universal mutuality.’ The first section will explore the kenotic self in the writings of Rowan Williams, first in his literary engagements with Dostoevsky as three refusals or parodies of the self are considered, and then as a new understanding of the self as author emerges. Next I will discuss the young Williams’ explorations of a vision of the self abandoned to time and history in the poetry of T. S. Eliot. Then I shall return to the theme of the kenotic self this time in his engagement with Lossky as the self is confronted with the apophatic mystery of the divine. Finally, I shall show how the self is taken up into the displacements of desire that constitute the very life of the Trinity. In section two, I will complete the analysis of Milbank’s theurgic self (begun in chapter two with Dionysius and continued in chapter three with Vico), first under the theme of repetition, where Milbank extends Kierkegaard’s own understanding of repetition this time as a liturgical and eschatological movement. Then I will consider Milbank’s poetic self in a retrieval of an understanding of *homo faber* now achieved through a renewed emphasis on participation and analogy and in dialogue with Heidegger and Arendt. And finally, I shall consider Milbank’s ‘many layered self,’ a ‘trans-organicity’ that has been lost on the

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way to modernity, but that can reconnect a newly atomised and flattened self (the ’buffered self’ of chapter one) with language, society, culture and cosmos. In the conclusion I will weave the threads of the kenotic and theurgic into a unified vision of the self.

Williams and the Kenotic Self

This section begins with Williams’ magisterial work on Dostoevsky as it explores themes of the self, language, relationality and kenosis. If Gray writes about Christological parodies in Williams’ explorations of Dostoevsky, then I would like to explore three Dostoevskian parodies of the self: first in terms of rationalising power verses irrational desire; second as an assertion of will rather than a recognition of grace; and third as a refusal of dialogue. Moving on from such parodies, Williams explores a different conception of the self in Dostoevsky: the self as author. Not now to be conceived in terms of authorial control or dominance, but rather as a kenotic bestowal of freedom. In this move Williams draws the self and God together in an intimate analogy. The section continues with an analysis of an early and unpublished selection of essays on Eliot’s Four Quartets. These essays see Williams at his most raw, writing of a self almost abandoned in time and history, bruised and bleeding. And yet, even here we discern another kind of kenosis as God hands himself over to the wounding limitations and dangerous fluidity of history, becoming an exile with the self in time and so paradoxically revealing its giftedness. This painful confrontation between self, time and eternity is then taken up in Williams’ exploration of Lossky and John of the Cross. Williams writes of an apophatic unsettling as the self is broken free from a bounded individuality and released into personal encounter with mystery. The self is caught up in the endless deflections of desire which constitute the very life of God. This ’completes’ Williams’ vision of the kenotic self, its ascent into the divine characterised by endless dispossession and dislocation.

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Dostoevsky and the Self as Author

As he writes on Dostoevsky, Williams wants to open up an ‘analogy between writing and divine creation,’ an understanding of ‘authorial presence and kenosis,’ where the task of authorship is ‘directed toward freedom and not control.’ Kenosis, for Williams, simply is this opening out to freedom, the mutual responsibility for generating a shared world of meaning. Dostoevsky achieves this ‘by creating a world in which the unexpected and unscripted is continually unfolding, in which there is no imposed last word.’ But how does Dostoevsky create such a world and such an authorial voice? Williams argues that this requires ‘a self-emptying in respect of the characters of the fiction, a degree of powerlessness in relation to them.’ This opening out of the world to freedom as explored in Dostoevsky’s novels is not to be seen as ‘a very improvisatory account of how identity is constructed,’ despite the polyphonic world that he creates, and despite the fact that no character is afforded a finality of perspective or any last word on meaning or significance (either for themselves or others). Rather, for Williams, Dostoevsky affirms human freedom by positing a space for an excess of being, ‘a background of depth and surplus in reality itself which holds and makes sense of all these dialogical processes.’ There is always more to be said. And this is where Williams locates the actuality of God: in the patient opening up of a shared world of meaning for the mutual construction of the human self. It is this kenotic opening up of the world that I will now explore in terms of three parodies of the self: first as rationalising power verses irrational desire, second as assertive will verses the bestowal of grace, and third as a refusal of dialogue.

In Dostoevsky, Williams first explores the tension between assertive will and irrational desire in the formation of the human self through a discussion of Notes from the Underground, the character of Shatov in Devils and the ‘Grand Inquisitor’ narrative in The Brothers Karamazov. In Notes from the Underground we encounter the Underground Man, ‘the tormented, savage, ironical and absurd first person of this text,’ who ‘directs some of

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4 Ibid., 226.
5 Ibid., 234.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 134.
his most concentrated venom at the philosophy of rational self-interest." Whereas mo-
dernity has sought to rationally direct or suppress irrational desire, Williams suggests
that ‘part of the distinctly human is the capacity for perversity, addiction, self-sacrifice,
self-destruction and a whole range of “rationally” indefensible behaviours.” But where
an instrumental and brutal rationality seeks to cut-off such irrationality the distinctively
human disappears and all we are left with is mechanical interaction and a violence that
is seen as the means of social rationalisation. As Williams puts it, ‘if someone wants to
dance, cut off his legs.” Enlightenment rationality cannot, in the end, tame the beast,
and what the Underground Man represents for Williams is ‘a highly dramatized version
of the Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness’ where it is acknowledged that ‘the self’s ideal
existence is unattainable, and what is actually experienced in self-awareness is failure
and finitude, finitude itself as a form of humiliation.” If we are not far from Hegel here,
then neither is Augustine too far away. Williams locates the danger in seeing reason ‘as
the triumphant exercise of rationalizing power,’ a power that is invasive and controlling,
where ‘the amputation of unmanageable desires for the sake of peace becomes the quint-
tessential form of “modern” violence.” Here the ‘rationality’ of an ever more violent state
is seen as the only power that can repress the unruly passions of the mob.

Williams considers a second parody of the self in terms of assertive will verses the in-
terruption of grace. He focusses on religious commitment as viewed as ‘the sheer power
of will to hold to whatever it likes,’ as this will is collectivised in Dostoevsky’s works in
explorations of Russian orthodoxy and national identity. The risk here is that a corporate
‘God-bearing’ is shadowed by the realisation that ‘the God whose purpose we “bear” is
our own projection.” To illustrate this Williams considers Shatov, a character in Devils
who seems to articulate a God who is only a form of Russia’s own self-assertion, a na-
tional surge of will which ultimately is only a ‘recipe for exclusion and for competition
without mercy.” In the end Shatov is undone as he attends his wife in labour where his

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9 Ibid., 17.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 18.
12 Ibid., 19.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 22.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
belief in corporate self-assertion is overturned by a moment of pure grace, of wonder and unquestioning generosity (even as Shatov knows the child is not his own). At this point in the novel, 'the conviction of something having been made possible by agency other than the will, is the pivot of change'. Williams is suggesting that for authentic moments of reconciliation to emerge in the life of the self a closed world of pure assertion and empty utility needs to make way for a world where gratuity and loving attention is possible.

Williams now turns to the narrative of the ‘Grand Inquisitor’ where Dostoevsky imagines Christ in the hands of the inquisitorial elite, an apparatus for the ‘successful management of the social and material environment’, a tool that drains the world of its mystery and risk. Williams explores ‘the famous and bewildering climax’ of the narrative where Christ ‘suddenly draws near to the old man without saying anything and quietly kisses him on his bloodless, ninety-year-old lips’. Williams sees the kiss as establishing Christ’s freedom, as an ‘interruption that introduces a new element into the moral world … the gratuity of love or joy’. In this encounter, Christ does not ask the impossible, but changes the scope of what is possible. And here we discover Dostoevsky’s ‘characteristically Eastern Christian insight that, by taking human nature, the divine person of the eternal Word transforms that humanity and communicates something of his own capacity and liberty to it.’ Here the world opens up for the self beyond technical control and management, beyond the violence of individual or collective will, a world infused with depth and meaning, a world of grace.

By taking the step of loving attention in the mundane requirements of life together, something is disclosed. But that step is itself enabled by a prior disclosure, the presence of gratuity in and behind the phenomena of the world: of some unconditional love.

The third parody of the self that Williams considers is the refusal of dialogue. It is important to notice that Dostoevsky’s characters are human selves in extreme contexts and as extreme articulations, characters that are fully implicated in their dialogues with

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17 Ibid., 25.
18 Ibid., 27.
20 Williams, Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction, 30.
21 Ibid., 32-33.
22 Ibid., 44.
themselves and their worlds, and that it is more often than not in their refusals that the deepest themes emerge. In the novels we encounter again and again 'the demonic campaign to reduce and finally abolish the historical and material – and potentially tragic – fluidity of the created self,' and again and again we see characters who 'refuse disclosure, refusing to be a subject who is vulnerable to both understanding and misunderstanding.' Dostoevsky as author never writes or speaks as a voice from nowhere, never presenting an unified object-world or a unified system of ideas, rather each perspective us deeply embedded, voiced by a particular character at a particular time in a particular place, where the reader is invited 'to take up this or that position and see what can be seen from there.' This means that there is 'no manifest and unchallengeable last word in the processes of human exchange,' but that the human self is invited to take a stand within history, to become a perspective around which 'the conflict and tension of other relationships' can be brought to reconciliation by the opening up of new vistas of truth. Indeed,

the only way in which we are to move toward a sustainable truth, a truth that is more than either a private ideology or a neutral description, is by being immersed in the interaction of personal agents and speakers.

Language is central to this understanding of freedom and truth: 'to say something is potentially to change what another sees as obvious, rational, possible and so on. To speak to someone is to alter his world.' In such a world as this, 'the speaking and acting self is not a finished thing; it is not transparent to itself, let alone anyone else, and its unity and intelligibility has to be constructed over time.' Only exchange and dialogue can allow real growth to occur, and this requires both risk and trust.

These parodies represent the closing down of possibilities of meaning and identity, but in the end Dostoevsky offers us a vision of the self that leads to a new understanding of both authorship and freedom. Mikhail Bakhtin discerns in Dostoevsky 'a completely

23 Ibid., 110.
24 Ibid., 111.
25 Ibid., 112.
26 Ibid., 113.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 114.
new structure for the image of a human being,”29 a structure generated by three artistic discoveries: (i) where authorial consciousness stands alongside its characters rather than inserting them into a finalising frame of reality or structure; (ii) the discovery of the ‘self-developing idea’ where the idea is not an enclosed or immutable aspect of an ideological system, but is rather revealed as a human event, vulnerable to history and its transformations; and (iii) where a context of authentic dialogue is imagined, where character and author are drawn into an open-ended conversation that involves risk and authentic surprise. He argues that this in ‘no way assumes a passivity on the part of the author’, but that to the contrary, ‘the author is profoundly active, but his activity is of a special dialogic sort ... a questioning, provoking, answering, agreeing, objecting activity. More than this, Bakhtin asserts, ‘this is, so to speak, the activity of God in His relation to man, a relation allowing man to reveal himself utterly ... to judge himself, to refute himself.’30 Williams is in profound agreement here, suggesting that ‘the author does not contend with his or her characters,’ but rather

takes responsibility for the time in which the narrative unfolds, setting out the landscape in which each is given the possibility if speaking and hearing. The moment of response in the continuing dialogue is itself the gift of a future; that is the mode in which the authorial initiative is present within the text itself ... the presence with whom ultimately every speaker may discover an exchange that is steadily and unfailingly life-giving and free of anxiety.31

If the Dostoevskian author is in some ways analogous to God as she or he creates an open-ended world of polyphony and dialogue, allowing a kenotic opening-out of that world in real freedom and with the risk of future meaning and of truth formed in and by the contingencies of history and community, then it is no less analogous to the self in its own constructions of its world. The self ‘who takes responsibility assumes the burden and the freedom of a sort of authorship. Responsibility is an invitation for others to be freely what they are.’32 Indeed, ‘I become responsible when I can “answer” for what is not

29  Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 284.
30  Ibid., 285.
32  Ibid., 169.
myself, when I can voice the needs or hopes of someone other without collapsing them into my own."\textsuperscript{33}

**T. S. Eliot and the Self Abandoned in Time**

I shall now explore the themes of kenosis and dispossession further through a discussion of an early series of essays on T. S. Eliot’s *The Four Quartets* by Williams. In these essays, Williams argues that Eliot’s poems ‘are not primarily about “time and eternity,” as is so often asserted; they are about time, history, and the appearance of meaning or vision *in time*, *in* the world of historical experience.’\textsuperscript{34} Indeed, Williams sees the Quartets as a kind of mobile dialogue where statements are ‘proposed, explored, and sometimes, if not rejected, at least qualified seriously.’ In his confrontation with Eliot’s poetry something of Williams’ own theological practice is formed, a practice that is questioning, perspectival, risky. Eliot also dramatises something of Williams’ understanding of the self, a self almost abandoned to history, to contingency, addressed only by a revelation that has also been cast into the agonies and uncertainties of time. And this revelation provokes a deeply apophatic and kenotic encounter.

The first of Eliot’s Quartet’s, *Burnt Norton*, leaves us with a tension between time and eternity. Meaning is not to be found in a panoptic sweep over the world or in some abstract withdrawal from it, but rather is discovered in the painful ordinariness of time and history. Or as Eliot puts it, ‘only through time time is conquered.’ This means, argues Williams, that Eliot sees the self as ‘unavoidably rooted in history, personal, social, and artistic, and destined to ‘produce’ history in the maintenance of culture – perhaps we might say, in the maintenance of *speech* itself.’\textsuperscript{35} There is no meaning unless it can be articulated in and through our histories. So *Burnt Norton* poses a question: can God’s creative and redemptive purposes be seen or heard even in the chaos and alienation of the self’s wandering through history? If not then no salvation is possible at all.

If *Burnt Norton* poses the question of time and meaning, then the second of Eliot’s Quartets, *East Coker*, confronts the reader with the dangerous objectivity of our world.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 171.
\textsuperscript{34} “The Four Quartets,” (1975), lecture 1, 1.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., lecture 1, 8.
There can be no escape ‘into facile system-spinning.’ Here Williams picks up Simone Weil’s concept of ‘attention,’ an honest contemplation of a world that is not at our disposal, a ‘totality that we can neither understand or control, nor defend ourselves against.’ There is a frightening unpredictability at work here, both of a history that is beyond the designs of a singular will, the contingent and fragile mobility of time, and the uncontrollability of divinity itself. But history and time are to be lived into, not escaped from. Williams comments on the line ‘where you are is where you are not,’ and detects a double movement:

Where you imagine you are, your starting-point, before the askesis of ignorance and dispossession begins, is unreal; and your true situation is ‘where you are not,’ the state in which the system-creating, fantasising ego has been abandoned in selfless ‘attention’ to given reality.

The self and its world seen only as fixed and stable substances to manipulate or control need to be deconstructed through an honest encounter with the dark and uncontrollable realities of our world. Once more we have the central significance of ‘metanoia,’ but not a conversion to a state beyond history and time, but rather a kenotic change of orientation, paradoxically an immersion into contingency, time and history that immerses us into the life of God. This kenotic movement is demonstrated in the incarnation inasmuch as ‘the creator’s hands behind history are themselves “bleeding.”’ God also shares our vulnerability to time and death, the chaotic rhythms of the world he made. Williams argues that if ‘God has made Himself vulnerable in this way, so must we. And if this means risk and real insecurity, this too must be faced.’

Dry Salvages intensifies and questions this vision of God and self wounded and yet reconciled through and in time. Now the self journeys through its world, living in a wounded attentiveness to what is and refusing the temptations of fantasy and system building. This is a ‘self-renouncing contemplation’ that recognises the need to ‘live in the flux and contingency of time, trusting that this renunciation of system-making is our only road to sharing in the life of our fellows.’ The vision presented is a demanding one.
where God's appearing in time is less an epiphany and more a passion, discerned in 'the
shipwreck of a human life.' Williams concludes this third essay with some extraordinary
words:

The 'kenotic' impulse which brings God into time as man reflects the 'kenosis' of
creation, the initial self-abandoning of God to darkness, to a freedom which He makes
to be other than Himself out of love. The darkness of created temporal existence is
sustained at every point by this kenotic compassion of the Creator. God's 'acceptance'
of the darkness, in creation and incarnation, calls men to respond, by themselves
accepting the same darkness, the same death, mirroring the self-renouncing act of
God: so that through the darkness we may touch the hands of God and know them as
healing.41

It seems that the woundedness of time and history, the vulnerable mobility of the self, is
both its curse and its redemption.

In his essay on the fourth Quartet, Williams argues for a vision for the self beyond iso-
lated individuality, chaotic relativity or dialectical advance.42 A new more 'painful and
demanding' vision is presented in which the fire of the Spirit at Pentecost is juxtaposed
with the enemy bomber raining down fire on London. Once more history is both annihi-
lation and redemption, but the self is not to be saved from history, only through it. If there
is a criticism to be made of the young Williams in these essays, it is in the very starkness
of the choices he sets before the self. The decision is between fire of two types, either de-
structive or purgative, and even as the incarnation validates history, it only does this by
condemning us to history. These are strong sentiments indeed. Perhaps what is missing
here is an acknowledgement that the Pentecostal fire is not simply purgative or judging,
but vivifying also, a symbol of the divine and yet endlessly creative desire. What needs
to be made clear is that the condemnation and exile of history and temporality is only
provisional, that kenosis can be met with ascent, that history's 'unresolved tensions ...
its puzzlement and darkness, failure, death,' do indeed finally become 'the only vehicle
of salvation possible.'43 The fragile mobility of the self is to be conceived as a gift and
not a curse. If these positive affirmations lie dormant in these early essays of Williams,
it is clear they come to a much sharper focus in his later work. What remains clear is

41 Ibid., lecture 4, 9.
42 Ibid., lecture 4, 4. It is clear that the young Williams has a very different understanding of Hegel than that
of his mature writing.
43 Ibid., lecture 4, 5.
the necessity of kenotic self-emptying remains for any meaningful sense of the self to emerge. This kenosis of the self enables the gift of the other’s perspective, and this is a central affirmation of Williams’ own theology. The temporality of the self, its embeddedness in history means that ‘the truth of this moment is inextricably bound in with a potential infinity of other moments and perspectives.’ Kenosis opens the self to the excesses of God, an infinity of perspective and meaning, itself disclosed in and through time.

The Self, Trinity, Confrontation and Desire

This confrontation between the self and God is taken up in Williams’ writings on Lossky. Williams notes that for Lossky, ‘apophatic theology, if it is truly Christian, must point beyond the intellect to the personal mystery of the Trinity which encounters the human person in the act of revelation.’ This is a ‘metanoia,’ a conversion in our thinking of the human person, a person constituted in its confrontation with the divine. Already this emphasis on confrontation is hinting at the significance of cost in the construction of the self, the necessity for it to walk the way of the cross itself. For Lossky, ‘the transcendent incomprehensibility of God’ is not merely a matter of ‘the limitations of finite intellect,’ but is rather ‘in some way a characteristic of God in himself.’ Drawing on Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus, Lossky sees apophasis as beyond intellect or language alone and returns to ‘the true character of apophasis as the expression of encounter with the inexhaustible personal being of God.’ Instead of falling into the difficulty of discerning a hidden ousia somehow behind or before the Trinitarian life of God, Lossky understands the Trinitarian relations themselves apocalyptically, arguing that ‘to see God is to contemplate the Trinity,’ and that here we are confronted with ‘the inexhaustible transcendence of God’s three-personed being.’

44 The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 129.
45 Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 4.
46 Ibid., 5.
47 Ibid., 8.
48 Ibid., 9.
This apophatic trinitarianism has radical consequences for an understanding of the human self. As the self faces this ‘revealed “darkness” of God’s infinity, the only response is that of a kenotic ekstasis, a self-forgetting which is an opening out to a ‘relationship of personal encounter between man and God in love.’ As Williams argues, ‘the person is a reality beyond the bondage of a closed conceptual system; and thus its proper activity is apophasis.’ To encounter God and to ‘know’ itself, the self must renounce its own conceptual activity and also renounce a world of determined and enclosed essences and systems. It must risk itself in the arena of encounter. As with God, so to with the human subject, the personal remains utterly apophatic where ‘it is the unknowable depths of things’ that constitutes their truth. This is why Lossky can write about the Trinity as ‘a cross for human ways of thought,’ as ‘the apophatic ascent is a mounting of calvary.’ Indeed, argues Williams, it is the cross that ‘reveals personality as “kenotic.”’

Williams reads Lossky’s argument in The Mystical Theology as follows. First Lossky establishes that ‘personality’ in the sense of ‘free transcendence’ constitutes the imago dei in humanity, where ‘the renunciation of existing-for-oneself is man’s most authentically personal act and so also man’s most Godlike act.’ (Notice here how the ‘image of God’ is dynamic.) Second we see that it is the incarnation that establishes this ‘kenotic pattern,’ where Jesus enacts the life of God in the flesh, ‘a life of rejection and agony, lived in the total self-renunciation of absolute obedience to the Father.’ Thirdly, it is this life that opens the way to understanding the life of the Trinity itself as fundamentally kenotic, where Christ’s own renunciation is ‘so to speak the very being of the Persons of the Trinity.’ Fourthly, this kenotic movement of the Trinity is confirmed by the coming of the Spirit into the world, ‘the mystery of the self-emptying, of the kenosis of the Holy Spir-

50 Williams, Wrestling with Angels, 13.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
54 Williams, Wrestling with Angels, 14.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 15.
57 Lossky, The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church, 144.
it’s coming,” where keeping his own person concealed, the Spirit reveals only what is common to the whole Trinity. Finally, argues Williams, this Trinitarian dogma ‘demands a belief that the abnegation of self and the absence of self-assertive, self-interested ‘individualism’ are the fundamental notes of person existence at its source, in God.” If, in the end, Lossky never quite teases out the ramifications for all of this in the act of creation itself, Williams discerns a clear trajectory where,

in creating free personal beings, God voluntarily limits his own omnipotence: there is a sort of risk involved, God making himself impotent before man’s freedom. The summit of God’s exercise of his omnipotence is precisely his abnegation of power over his free creatures.

This is a key moment in Williams’ theology. Kenosis provides the shape of the self’s constructions, just as it provides the shape of ecclesial practice and history, and, indeed human sociality and history, as each of these is, for Williams, an instance of God’s life working itself out in the other. Each of these takes a kenotic shape because kenosis is the shape of God’s own life. This will come into sharpest focus as I consider Williams in relationship to John of the Cross next.

If, as I have been arguing, kenosis stands at the heart of Williams’ understanding of the self, then John of the Cross represents the epitome of the tradition’s reflections on this theme. In his writings, John offers ‘a Trinitarian theology of negation.” Like Lossky, John does not reach behind the Trinitarian relations to find some hidden essence, but rather understands ‘negative theology as it applies to the relations of divine life.” Beginning with John’s Romanzas, Williams explicates a theology where the divine essence is not ‘a “nature” beyond or behind the three, but with the movement of one into another in desire.” Williams is here placing erotic desire at the heart of the Trinitarian life. In the Romanzas this Trinitarian narration enfolds and initiates creation itself. The potentially closed mutuality of Father and Son is exploded open by the excess of the Spirit; the

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58 Ibid., 168.
59 Williams, Wrestling with Angels, 15.
60 Ibid., 16.
62 Ibid., 116.
63 Ibid., 118.
Father’s joy in the Son spills out into a potential multitude of others; and the Son looks forward to the free bestowal of this new relationship, those who are to be ‘burned’ by the Father’s *eros*; this bestowal simply is creation; and then then Son ‘completes’ this Trinitarian romance by taking flesh and ‘satisfying the yearning of creation ... the essential gift of the incarnation’.64 As John himself writes, ‘and God would be man’/and man would be God.’65 The life of the Spirit thus becomes ‘a transcription into the circumstances of the world of the divine excess and displacements of love,’ whereby ‘our love is deflected into the same excess as God’s love shows.’66

For Williams, this means the self is being constantly stretched out in erotic desire in a movement of kenosis and ascent, the purgative and doxological ascent of love. This circling movement transforms desire from that which seeks its terminus or closure in another as an object that satisfies, into an endless desire which is perpetually deflected by the excesses of divine life. This is what makes this movement kenotic. A kind of restructuring of the Augustinian triad of memory, intellect and will into faith, hope and love, a kind of eschatological yearning where there is no longer any determinative object ‘because God is that in which these virtues terminate, and God is no determinate object.’67 And once more, as in Lossky, this kenotic movement is most clearly narrated by John in the encounter of the self with God in the apophatic ‘dark night,’ in the ‘sense of a dissolution of selfhood itself,’ and in ‘the dereliction of Jesus on the cross.’68

Williams ties together the experience of the self and Christ at this moment of Trinitarian kenosis. To be ‘included’ in the love of the Son for the Father, is to ‘participate in a love without satisfaction of closure,’ and this endless love can only be felt as ‘pain and privation’ before it can be ‘recognised as freedom.’ This is the movement of the self in apophasis and kenosis. And this pain and privation is linked, indeed, enfolded within Christ’s experience (particularly of Gethsemane and Calvary) where ‘the excess and elusiveness of the Father’s love’ is finally to be discerned in ‘the "annihilation" of the der-

64  Ibid., 119.
67  Ibid., 120.
68  Ibid., 120, 21.
lection of the cross. This is dense argumentation from Williams, but the question remains: is this the painful creation of subjectivity itself, or the repair of an alienated and broken ego? What happens to the violence of the cross in this kenotic vision? Is the violence of the world sublated into the violence of eros? This is clearly a movement of ‘active receptivity’ in which the passion of Christ, ‘the moment he is “brought to nothing” … is the moment at which he is most supremely active in the salvation of the world.

It seems to me that Williams is arguing that this painful kenosis is the ascent of the self seen from the other side: it is painful before it can be embraced as freeing as it is a breakage of disordered desire, the shattering of a fictive sense of self. But this movement is also its re-creation, an immersion into the endlessly deflected love of the trinity itself. To return to Lossky, ‘the apophatic ascent is a mounting of calvary.’ Despite – or because of – the non aliud character of God’s difference, Christ and the self are drawn together in a most intimate dance of desire in which we are prepared for ‘the fullness-in-absence of the love of the Word to the Father,’ and drawn into ‘the profoundly elusive and alarming “deflections” of love that constitute the life of the Trinity.’ And, as I have shown, for this desire to take root and grow, the self needs to be thrown back into a world of history, contingency and otherness, to learn to see the fragile mobility of its constructions as a gift.

**Milbank and the Theurgic Self**

In this section I will plot the final trajectory of the self as its poetic shaping is enfolded in the divine life. I will begin with Milbank’s engagement with Kierkegaard in the area of repetition, in which the self risks itself through a choreographic leap into a world of meaning. Even as Kierkegaard’s Protestantism remains dangerously individualistic, Milbank shows how repetition can be taken beyond individual anxiety as it is now opened

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69 Ibid., 121.
70 See chapter 2’s analysis of Milbank and Gregory of Nyssa.
73 Williams, “The Deflections of Desire,” 123.
74 Ibid., 128.
out to the liturgical and eschatological. This sense of repetition is now met with the complementary theme of poiesis as Milbank retrieves an ‘analogy of creation’ through an engagement with Nicholas of Cusa. Like Williams, Milbank interprets the ‘image of God’ dynamically, but now more in terms of poetic creativity and excess. This poetic self also begins its ascent into the divine, this time taken beyond its own intentionality as it is thrown into a world of endless meaning. In this excess can be discerned the very working of God. Finally I will explore Milbank’s vision of ‘trans-organicity,’ a theurgic vision of a many-layered self that is orientated towards the transcendent. This theurgic self expresses the generativity of the divine, itself now conceived ‘culturally’ as an ever-expansive movement of communicative expression and interpretation, endlessly played back in the harmonies of Church and cosmos.

The Self and Repetition

Milbank understands Kierkegaard’s writings as ‘if giving rough stage directions’ for what we might call performances of the self, performances that ‘only the reader can realize’ and realise differently.75 Philosophy is not considered here as a system of abstract thought or a guide-book, but rather as a dramatic script that invites the reader’s improvised participation. As Pattison suggests, the freedom Kierkegaard offers ‘can only be actualised in the measure that readers actualise their own freedom by taking responsibility for their own interpretations of the text.’76 Hence Kierkegaard’s use of repetition, which is for Milbank both subversive and anti-metaphysical. Rather than the dull repetition or mere echo of an originary event, ‘every moment introduces something new that has itself the weight of categorical uniqueness.’77 Milbank sees that the self of repetition is at risk, in which every identity ‘can be undone through the very movement that constitutes it,’ but continuity can be affirmed through decision, this decision gathering up the moments of the flux in intentionality, providing shape and meaning to the self’s expres-

sions (or perhaps better, character). In this way identity is 'precariously affirmed' and yet 'must remain endlessly in question, endlessly liable to fracture and postponement.'

Whereas repetition has been taken up by post-structuralists only to undermine the project of humanism by situating the human agent within 'an indeterminately creative and destructive process,' it seems that Kierkegaard can affirm the subject even while acknowledging the risk and danger of its mobility. Giles Deleuze suggests that Kierkegaard only manages this because of a certain schizophrenia between his skepticism and his fideism, 'where reason comes adrift, there belief is anchored.' However, it is important to remember that the religious for Kierkegaard, is not a category that answers questions that reason fails to give, but is rather a provoking, subversive and risky stepping into the abyss. For Kierkegaard, faith is what keeps the question of the self open. As Davis suggests,

> the deepening of inwardness is not a movement toward an unchanging identity but the act of putting oneself further at risk ... the recognition that dramatic agency, not substance, constitutes the identity of the existential subject.

What the Deleuzian critique seems to miss is that Kierkegaard is the ancestor to two seemingly opposed twenty-first century discourses: first existentialism, with its emphasis on the self-directing subject that wills beyond the universal; but also post-structuralism, where the subject is written before it writes. Milbank argues that it is in the apparent contradiction of these two traditions that Kierkegaard’s significance is to be discerned, and like Kierkegaard, Milbank sets about articulating a choreographic self, the 'inscribing figure who is also the figure inscribed.' Davis is in agreement here, stating that,

> to grasp subjectivity, one must avoid both the Kantian trap of resubstantializing subject and the deconstructive trap of random dispersal ... We don't live the anguish of subjectivity in abstract repetition, forever differing and deferring, or as exiles forever moving in nostalgia toward the future harmony of a fixed identity. We live it as a discipline of progressive concretization in which we always remain at risk.

78  Ibid., 133.
79  Ibid., 134.
83  Davis, *Inwardness and Existence*, 149.
This means the self is not a *cogito*, neither is it some timeless or abstract presence, but rather an activity of decision. Such an understanding offers an alternative to both deconstruction – where the subject is dispersed among endless linguistic chains, and a particular metaphysics of presence – where the subject is recovered as originary essence or substantial presence. Rather, ‘subject is verbal, the act of its own projection.’

Milbank sees in Kierkegaard a renewed emphasis on repetition as opposed to a certain interpretation of Platonic recollection. According to Kierkegaard, Plato argues that knowledge is not a discovery, anticipating what might be, but is, rather, a recovery of something lost, a recollection of something half-remembered, eternity imagined as a lost actuality. But repetition, as a dynamic movement forward, instead anticipates eternity. As Caputo writes, ‘in repetition, eternity is not something lost but something to be attained, not a lost actuality but a possibility yet to be seized, not something passed (past) but something to come, not something to recover, but something toward which we must press forward.’

But even as Kierkegaard sees eternity as the true repetition, it seems his ‘covert individualism’ makes him somewhat deaf to the sacramental and perhaps to the eschatological. If the existentialists can only imagine a repetition emerging out of anxiety and thrown towards death as the ultimately authenticating moment for the individual; and if the post-structuralists can only imagine an endless deferral of identity and meaning, then perhaps, repetition can only be given eschatologically. Now it can be argued that the past is no longer to be conceived through the tranquil recollection of the individual soul (to caricature Plato), but as that which is traditioned, the storied encounters of a community. And also the future, as tradition and community embark on a common ‘performance of a journey’ where ‘both past and future perform the truth in an adequation of eternity’s embrace of time, which is as much eschatological as protological.’ The life of the soul is a repetition-in-difference as incarnation and fulfilment are endless replayed and anticipated in language and ritual.

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84 Ibid., 165.
87 Ibid., 270.
This is where the Fathers and Kierkegaard meet. This repetition-in-difference takes on a pattern of ascent and descent, the ascent of the human world in deification, made possible by the incarnational descent of God into the human. But as Milbank argues, this descent is not a closed-off event completed once and for all, but is to be constantly repeated in the sacramental and *kenotic* activity of the Church. Indeed ‘the ascent of deification is impossible unless God constantly descends to us – meeting us liturgically with our acts in time.’ Baptism and Eucharist instigate the same theurgic descent that Mary enacts in the gospels, ‘a drama which is both heavenly and historical,’ and such ascents and descents are constantly to be re-performed through sacrament and sign, word and action. In the imagination of the early Fathers, this recapitulation is the restoration of the divine *pleroma*, or fullness, in the created sphere as the ‘fragments’ of God’s glory are patiently woven together in new patterns and relationships. This sacramental and eschatological repetition is a recollection and anticipation of all that has been and all that will be. In this way, argues Pickstock,

> the *pleroma*, comprising God as both God and Creation, eternally and infinitely repeats itself, identically and non-identically, as sign, while the sign eternally and infinitely repeats itself, identically and non-identically, as gift.

All things point away from themselves as sign and towards the excess of God as gift, and so finally come to be only in relation to everything else, as the ecstatic excesses of divine meaning, activity and life.

### The Poetic Self

Milbank draws together this Kierkegaardian emphasis on repetition with a new focus on *poiesis*, now conceived in terms of participation and analogy. As I have already demonstrated (particularly in chapter 3), central to Milbank’s anthropological concerns is a concept of *homo faber*, an ‘exaltation of human creativity’ which is ‘not medieval but modern and Romantic.’ But it seems that Milbank’s vision is modernity with a twist.

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88 Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider, eds., *Encounter between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World through the Word* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 78.


90 Ibid., 197.

Eschewing the ‘turn inward in order to go upward’ in the trajectory of a subjectivity that he traces from Plotinus right through to Descartes, Milbank favours a theurgic turn. The activity of the self in its constructions is not so much performed in an interior mental space upon empirically received sensory material, but rather an outward artefacting, performed by the mind and body in conjunction and guided, not by established if hidden rational norms, but rather by the lure of a transcendent telos which to a degree only makes itself apparent through our own poetic shaping.92

This ‘lure’ once more mobilises the self as it poetically shapes (and is shaped by) reality through a desire which is drawn into the divine creativity itself. Here we have an ‘anticipation’ of grace (and grace for Milbank is itself always creative93) and, as we have seen, a creative re-interpretation of Plato – a ‘recollection forwards’ rather than backwards. But now I want to focus my attention on the relationship between Milbank’s understanding of homo faber and a concept of the divine image as most creatively explored by the fifteenth century Nicholas of Cusa. Of particular significance here is Cusa’s Idiotata de mente, ‘a discussion about the meaning of mens, the life of human intelligence and knowledge that is an image of the mind of God.’94 It is the understanding developed here that Milbank terms ‘the “realist” model of constructivism.’95 What makes Cusa so interesting to Milbank is that his emphasis on creativity and activity mark a clear distinction from Scholasticism, but that this emphasis takes a very different tone to later secular interpretations. Cusa begins not questions about the experience of human knowing, but rather with ‘conjectures’ about the mysteries of divine knowing.96 Here Cusa is at his most Platonic and Thomist, though he moves both in radically new directions.

In his conjectures on divine knowing, Cusa stresses two aspects: the infinite dynamics of God’s power coupled with the paradox of divine simplicity. In this way the productive and creative character of God’s knowing, where God is imagined as an eternal artisan, an exemplar standing for ‘all human making and artistry,’ is brought center stage. The

92  Ibid., 209.
93  See ibid., 196.
95  Milbank, Beyond Secular Order, 209.
96  ‘Conjecture’ is also a key term in Milbank’s ouvre. More than simple rationalism or intellectual reflection, it enfolds ideas of imagination and embodied perspective.
key point is that for Nicholas the divine image in humanity is not about a static or iconic essence, but rather about creative power and productive activity (we are not far here from our considerations of Gregory of Nyssa). This means that our creation of language and knowledge find their dynamic in the creativity of the divine Logos. No longer is the Logos defined in Greek terms as the ideal measure that reality has fallen away from, but now becomes the ‘magnetised’ goal that all things are orientated and mobilised towards.

Milbank sees Cusa as standing not so much as a transitional figure between the medieval and modern worlds, but as embodying a medieval trajectory that has been eclipsed by dominant understandings of the modern.

Near the end of his work, Cusa returns to a consideration of an artistic self-portrait to press further his linking of human creative production and its relationship to the image of God. Nicholas suggests that God is related to our minds (or perhaps better, our creative thinking and making) in the same way an artist is to his self-portrait. Here the human mind is seen as disclosive of the creative mind of God. But there is a danger here as a self-portrait is necessarily a static image – an essence to be captured – but Nicholas pushes us further, ‘proposing that there is a difference between a static image or self-portrait and a dynamic one.’ Cusa writes,

'It is as if a painter were to make two self-portraits, one of which, though lifeless, appeared more like him, while the other, though less like him, was alive and of a sort that could always make itself more conformed once its object roused it to act.'

We discover that the image of God within us has everything to do with our creative activity – a participation in God’s endless productive creativity and artistry. Such a dynamic conception of the image of God in humanity leads Milbank to think in terms of

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97 There are echoes of Gregory of Nyssa’s tying together of dynamis and ousia here.
98 Miller, *Reading Cusanus*, 124.
99 Ibid., 126.
100 Quoted in ibid., 127.
an ‘analogy of creation’ rather than the more traditional ‘analogy of being,’ where the emphasis is now on the reciprocal creativity of the human and divine.\textsuperscript{101} This leads to the most radical possible notion of human creative power. Not the power to create illusions, nor even beautiful new colours, patterns and sounds, but rather the power to create new historical realities as such, new modes of living which human beings must perforce inhabit and so in the end a power to reshape humanity itself.\textsuperscript{102}

We can now understand why Milbank sees \textit{poiesis} as an integral aspect of Christian practice and redemption. Its work is the ceaseless re-narrating and ‘explaining’ of human history under the sign of the cross.\textsuperscript{103} And we can see why \textit{poiesis} is the key to his ‘post-modern theology.’ Such poetical endeavour is culminated in liturgical practice where God is first prayed to, hymned, enacted and performed before being theorised. Indeed, the doctrine of creation pushes towards a belief in temporality, ‘the priority of becoming and unexpected emergence.’ Here reality is seen as ‘a reality of flux … composed only of relational differences and ceaseless alterations.’\textsuperscript{104} This means that \textit{poiesis} for Milbank is conceived as a ‘\textit{concentus musicus} … a consensus that is only in and through the interrelations of community itself, and a consensus that moves and “changes.”’\textsuperscript{105} In this liturgical and artistic endeavour, ‘desire shapes truth beyond the imminent implications of any logical order, so rendering the Christian \textit{logos} a continuous product as well as a process of “art.”’\textsuperscript{106} Milbank, echoing Maximus, sees the \textit{Logos} as ‘the lost harmonic pattern of genuine human life.’\textsuperscript{107} But this pattern is to be anticipated by human action, no longer a turn inwards – like the \textit{cogito} – but rather a movement outwards into ‘a world of temporary relational and habitual networks,’ where ‘the point is not to “represent” this externality, but just to join in its occurrence; not to know, but to intervene, originate.’\textsuperscript{108}

This understanding of \textit{poiesis} leads Milbank into a consideration of incarnation and the Trinity, utterly different from Williams’ own reflections above, and yet evoking a strange affinity. Milbank understands the tenor and structure of \textit{poiesis} to be located

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\textsuperscript{102} Beyond Secular Order, 211.
\textsuperscript{103} \textit{The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture} (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 32.
\textsuperscript{104} \textit{The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology} (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 339.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 341.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 348.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 346.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 338.
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in the realities of incarnation and Trinity.\textsuperscript{109} Seeing the life, death and resurrection of Christ ‘an ordinariness “transfigured,”’\textsuperscript{110} Milbank argues that it is not possible to conceive of the divine life metaphysically, but rather through a life lived like ours, where God’s perfection is most like this particular life, the life of Jesus Christ. This life cannot simply be subsumed into our own, but remains ‘other’ in its capacity to judge all others. If Christ’s life perfectly transposes the music of God’s life into a human key, it also does this by playing a critical and questioning note. But a certain imaginative \textit{poiesis} is at work here also: the incarnation allows us to imagine the possibilities of a peaceful, totally charitable God, who cannot force us, and yet cannot let us go,\textsuperscript{111} or to translate this to a liturgical key, a God ‘who opens wide his arms for us on the cross.’ However, by ‘tying us to contingency,’ the incarnation allows a focus upon particularity. It is in this life that God comes to us, and our particular life that enables a response of ‘aesthetic harmony.’ In this way, Christ’s performance enables the Church’s performance, but this is a repetition-in-difference, not some prescriptive or theoretical formula. Milbank suggests that this repetition-in-difference is ‘the work of the Spirit,’\textsuperscript{112} and the parallels with Lossky are clear. Milbank understands the work of the Spirit as radically open-ended and innovative, a true return to mobility beyond stifling ‘human discourses that totally subsume all differences, new occurrences, under existing categories.’\textsuperscript{113} Indeed, for Milbank, atonement means letting the flux flow again, but this time beyond the antagonisms of a certain post-modernism, as a harmonious movement of the body of Christ.

Here Milbank seeks to develop a Trinitarian vision of excess. The Father speaks forth a Word that unites and enfolds all, but this ‘first difference of expressive articulation’ is met by the second difference of the Spirit, the ‘interpretation of expression.’ The dynamics of Trinitarian life become the confluence of expression and interpretation, an infinite relation of excess.

\textsuperscript{109} Instead of a modern \textit{techne} seen only as the expression of an absolute will to dominate and control, we now have a creative participation in a synergic reciprocity.

\textsuperscript{110} Milbank, \textit{The Future of Love}, 346.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 347.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
God as Trinity is therefore himself community, and even a ‘community in process,’ infinitely realized beyond any conceivable opposition between ‘perfect act’ and ‘perfect potential.’

This is similar to Loughlin’s storied understanding of the trinity where ‘there is a dynamic to trinitarian story-telling, an omni-directionality of narrative movement.’ And with Williams and Lossky, Milbank locates the *imago dei* of humanity in the dynamics of the Trinitarian relations themselves, as a recollection and anticipation of Trinitarian life. What is being argued here is that ‘a thoroughly theological – and especially Trinitarian and pneumatological – account of identity will focus on flux and movement rather than on a stable self.’

In “A Christological Poetics,” Milbank describes the poetics of humanity under three themes: (i) poetic activity; (ii) poetic understanding; and (iii) *poiesis* and praxis. In (i), Milbank seeks to understand humanity as ‘fundamentally poetic being,’ combining culture and history alongside contemplation and the ethical, attempting to show that human being completes itself in the liturgical. This is a repetition-in-difference where ‘human activity always outstrips itself through poetic productions that exceed the agent’s intention.’ Milbank seeks to go beyond both Plato – where *poiesis* is reduced to a replication of previous theoretical design – and Aristotle – where there can only be a movement from the privation of potential to the sufficiency of act. Instead there is an excess of meaning, a dynamic surplus in every human act, and it is here that God is to be located, ‘an infinite surplus of meaning in the human symbol and the human text.’ Milbank’s vision of the poetic self is a thickly layered one combining four aspects. First, constructions of meaning are also to be seen as intensities of desire, never fully contained or control by human intention or measure. Second, self-awareness is constituted through relation, an ‘inexhaustible dialectic’ of recognition and misrecognition taking place beyond the interior solitude of the Cartesian *cogito*. Third, this requires a certain dispossession, where meaning and intention are outstripped by the thing itself – as sign-makers we belong to

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114 Ibid., 348.
117 Ibid., 422.
a world of signs that we neither author or control. And fifth, this means the self is constituted only by a ‘risky openness’ in a world of excess beyond intention.

Explicating poetic understanding, Milbank once more goes beyond Aristotle, seeing human understanding both in terms of *mimesis*, a replication of desire or activity, and *mythos*, the creation of a world. Taken together these enable a “narrative” vision of human life."\textsuperscript{119} This means that the human self constructs its world primarily through metaphor and imagination, where “human poetic activity produces “concrete universals” as a “measure and *telos* for human activity.”\textsuperscript{120} We can illustrate this kind of poetic understanding through two Scriptural examples. The first is the poetry of the exilic prophets – in the doxological humiliation of the empire of Babylon in the writings of second Isaiah; or else in the parabolic utterances and actions of Jesus in the gospels – for example in the subversion of the categories of blindness and sight, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, judgement and forgiveness in John 9. In such cases, new ethical action is made possible by a new poetic construal of the world, an unsettling construal that subverts and recasts what was once thought stable.

For Milbank, ethical activity is always inspired by the poetic world we construct. It is the constructed narratives of our imagined worlds that inform our praxis, rather than some abstract theoretical code. In this way *poiesis* always ‘opens up deeper possibilities of human behavior.’ This is why in a deliciously hyperbolic chapter in the same work, “Can Morality Be Christian?,” Milbank’s triumphantly scandalous response is ‘no.’ This is because Milbank sees that the poetic construction of the moral world and that of the Christian cosmos are dramatically opposed. According to Milbank, the ‘moral man … acts with what he knows of death, scarcity and duty to totalities,’ whereas the Christian acts in faith, not working towards self-sufficiency and self-goverance in a context of enclosed and fixed scarcity, but instead ‘acting excessively out of … excess.’\textsuperscript{121} This poetic account of the self is completed by its poetic encounter with God where the activity of God is located in this excess, in the surplus beyond human intentionality. Bauerschmidt is right to suggest that ‘what Milbank offers is a “non-competitive” account of the re-

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 127.
\textsuperscript{120} Bauerschmidt, “The Word Made Speculative,” 422.
\textsuperscript{121} Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 231.
relationship between divine and human activity; the “natural” excess of human poetic activity is simultaneously the “supernatural” activity of God. Moving to a consideration of Christ, Milbank argues that he is to be understood as both divine and human utterance. As the divine utterance, Jesus is the absolute origination of all meaning, but as human utterance Jesus is inheritor of all already constituted human meanings. In Christ we discover a human performance that perfectly displays the excesses of God’s own life, but it is also a performance that gathers up all other human activity in ‘a plenitude of performance.’ But in all this talk of excess, Milbank does allow for a certain distance to be maintained between the life of God and the life of humanity. Indeed, there is an ‘infinite distance between humanity and God,’ and this means that ‘Christ is a sign that is broken on the cross.’ We are not far here from Williams’ early musings on the *Four Quartets*, where ‘God is known as active in time only in his passion in time.’ Temporality still provides for a certain woundedness.

Although in these speculative essays Milbank leaves the actual performance of Christ’s life as rather thin and largely abstract, it is clear that he intends such poetic considerations to be fleshed out by the Church’s Scriptural and liturgical engagements and practice. Rowan Williams’ own *Tokens of Trust* is especially helpful here as he takes up the analogy of music in his understanding of the life of Jesus. This Jesus performs

> God’s love, God’s purpose, without a break, without a false note, without a stumble; yet he is never other than himself, with all that makes him distinctly human taken up with this creative work.

In this work, as elsewhere, Williams is more careful than Milbank in his preservation of the particularity and historicity of Jesus. However, for both writers, this poetic self, consummately performed by Jesus and in the practice of the Church – always under the sign of the cross – participates in the dynamic excesses of the Trinitarian life.

It is useful to draw Milbank’s retrieval of *homo faber* and the poetic self into dialogue with Arendt and Heidegger, both of which write compellingly of the dangers of a cer-

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124 Ibid., 137.
126 Williams, *The Four Quartets*, lecture 4, 7.
tain instrumentalising vision of the modern self as human making is cut-off from its transcendent source and the self’s world is reduced only to production and exchange. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt sees *homo faber* as embodying the modern deceit that ‘man is the measure of all things,’ and discusses his main characteristics as ‘his instrumentalization of the world,’ the reduction of all things ‘to the principle of utility,’ and his utter autonomy over the material, to make of his world what he wills.¹²⁸ For Arendt, *homo faber* stands accused of reducing the modern world to an arena of mere ‘economics, whose highest standard is productivity.’¹²⁹ *Homo faber* seeks to dominate and control, ‘to degrade nature and the world into mere means, robbing both of their independent dignity.’¹³⁰ Like Milbank, Arendt ‘locates’ this modern turn in Vico, but gives a drastically different interpretation of him, seeing in him only ‘the despair of human reason,’ the turning away from an understanding of the world to man’s artificial and lifeless production of the object.¹³¹

In his “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger plots a similar path, writing about technology in order to ‘explain the tragic condition of the contemporary world.’¹³² Heidegger is useful due to his refusal to see technology as neutral, as a simple tool of use for the self. Rather our use of technology to control and quantify our world already supposes a certain way of seeing and being-in-the-world, a way of being that is blind to its own dangers. Heidegger explores the relationship between *techne* and *poiesis*, arguing that in the ancient world the creative manipulation of the craftsman (*techne*) belonged with the poetic generation of beauty (*poiesis*), both of which were ways of knowing the world (*episteme*).¹³³ In our modern age it seems the being of the world and our knowing of it has been reduced to what Heidegger calls ‘standing-reserve.’¹³⁴ As Sheehan writes, ‘Earth is now seen as a vast storehouse of resources, both human and natural; and the value and realness of those resources, their being, is measured exclusively by their avail-

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¹²⁹ Ibid., 306.
¹³⁰ Ibid., 156.
¹³¹ Ibid., 299.
¹³⁴ Ibid., 322.
ability for consumption.”

_The_ has now been divorced from _poiesis_ and the modern human self is ‘enclosed’ or ‘enframed’ (ge-stell in Heidegger’s terms) by production and utility. It seems that in an age of technology, humanity has lost its soul.

Even as Milbank agrees with Arendt and Heidegger that construction is _the_ mark of modernity, he refuses the contemporary sundering of _poiesis_ and _techne_ and therefore imagines a different trajectory of the modern. _Poiesis_ is not merely secular and is never the exclusive domain of human autonomy and the instrumentalisation of the world. Against the individualist and representational trajectory begun by Plotinus and ‘completed’ by Scotus, Milbank follows a theurgic trajectory from Dionysius, through Cusa to Vico (as I have shown). In Milbank’s _poiesis_, ‘a more “modern” awareness of immanent dynamism, human self-construction and unlimited cosmic scope’ is seen not in the manipulation, domination or dissection of its world, but rather as production and exchange are reconfigured as liturgical and doxological gift.

**The Trans-Organic Self**

If an understanding of _poiesis_ and the poetic self is Milbank’s ‘key to a post-modern theology’, then the other aspect to his theological reconstruction of the self is an imaginative retrieval of what might be termed a pre-modern integral vision. Milbank calls this the ‘medieval synthesis’ and in his _Beyond Secular Order_ explores it under the theme of ‘trans-organicity’. In his sequence, on political ontology, in that same work, he gives a decidedly Milbankian definition of this ‘trans-organicity: ’an integrity sustained despite an interruptive leap.’ He goes further arguing that it is

> a continuity of transcendence with the biological ground that it exceeds, and a continued biological enfolding of a vertical _ecstasis_ beyond the merely biological – beyond ‘life’ towards ‘reason’ (as also towards the social, the cultural and the artificial) yet in such a way that reason constituted a more elevated kind of life.

135 Sheehan, _Making Sense of Heidegger_, 258.
136 Heidegger, _Basic Writings_, 332.
138 _The Word Made Strange_, 32.
139 _Beyond Secular Order_, 137-38.
If modernity casts a spatial grid over existence, dividing it up into atomised and distinct parts – the biological, the social, the religious – then the 'trans-organic' is a thickly layered and dynamically hierarchical vision with a porosity of boundary between each layer. Each layer flows into the other, organically and creatively, and with each layer informing and shaping the other. More than this, against modernity’s ‘spatialization’ which sees each human activity as distinct and without telos or goal, the ‘trans-organic’ vision imparts a dynamic mobility to the self, an orientation to a transcendent end, which is already a participation in its own telos. This ‘trans-organicity’ of the self is formed ‘through a complex tangle of mediations: cosmic, rational, linguistic, poetic, and historical.’ What might be termed a ‘post-modern neoplatonic’ vision locates in the material, the social, the historical and the cultural, ‘a radical divine descent’ that enables ‘a radical human ascent’ through these same media. Radicalising de Lubac, Milbank sees the ‘trans-organic’ self as ‘naturally orientated to the supernatural,’ a self that is pulled ‘naturally beyond our nature in an ecstasy at the outset.’

That this vision is a creative recasting of Thomism in a post-structuralist guise is one of Milbank’s most controversial and contested claims, but there can be no doubting the theological creativity behind this vision of the self, a self constituted by (or as a particular intensity of) ‘the event of divine kenotic descent’ which is also ‘the event of eschatological ascent.’ Milbank’s ‘trans-organic’ understanding defines ‘Man as a rational animal, as a social animal, as a fabricating animal (homo faber), and as destined to the beatific vision.’ It is these ever-expanding textural layers of the self – the animal, the rational, the social, the political and the cosmological – that point back to chapter one and Charles Taylor’s ‘porous self.’ Reversing the slide towards modernity in Taylor’s A Secular Age, we can here suggest the return of transcendence. Instead of the ‘turn inward in order to go upward,’ we have a new stress on the mediation of the world, ‘a book signed by its author in whose being it participates by virtue of that author’s creative ac-

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141 Ibid., 464.
143 Milbank, “Intensities,” 464.
144 Beyond Secular Order, 5.
Instead of a withdrawal from the social as an arena of rivalrous competition, we have a new emphasis on the harmonious giftedness of society beyond violence; instead of time known only in its immanence, time is once more understood as the moving image of eternity and a new liturgical expression and sacramental understanding allow for their mutual indwelling. Now the self is seen as a sign that points beyond itself, a poetic excess of its own intentionality and relationality; society is seen as a sign that points beyond itself, a dynamic and porous hierarchy of ever new relational transformations; and finally cosmos is seen as a sign that points beyond itself, everywhere wounded by a divine yearning that points to its own *apokatastasis*.

Milbank’s vision of the trans-organic clearly alludes to the ‘metaxological’ as articulated in William Desmond’s philosophy—the self of the between. In these complimentary visions, ‘self and other cannot be reduced to objectifiable things, for they are worlds within themselves,’ sustaining ‘a transworldly reach, supporting a middle space’ in which ‘both are drawn to something more, whose elusiveness and inexhaustibility not even the finite beloved can capture.’ Its worth exploring Desmond’s vision more closely at this point as it intersects and augments Milbank’s own. Like Milbank, Desmond proposes a *poiesis* of selfhood, a ‘progressive unfolding of the self,’ and also an excess, ‘an overdetermined ontological excess or plenitude or unmastered depth to the self’s inward otherness.’ Desmond’s vision is also a dynamic one—the self is mobile, ‘the emergence in finite being of an infinitely restless desire.’ And like Milbank’s ‘trans-organic’ self, Desmond’s *metaxological* self is porous, opened-out to a transcendence that is mediated by the relations of world, sociality, community and the other. In Desmond’s own words, ‘the metaxological approach affirms the difference between finite and infinite, yet allows that this difference grants a space of porosity across which communication can happen, though never such as to be captured by an immanent totality.’

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148 Ibid., 67.
Commenting on the Greek word *hyperballein*, meaning 'thrown above,' or 'to be thrown above,' Desmond notes that the self is carried above itself not by rational thought alone, but 'in a surpassing of self-exceeding,' and that the 'infinite restlessness of our being' is not its own measure and neither is it its own project. What Milbank might term the priority of the liturgical in the formation of the self – its festive opening-out to transcendence in ritual, hymnody and community, beyond the merely rational, Desmond captures in four 'hyperboles of being.' The first is 'the idiocy of being,' the term 'idiocy' being used in its Greek idiom. This is an openness to the sheer givenness of reality, an orientation to the world that encounters it as more than an instrument of will, an astonishment that leads to the doxological. The second is the 'aesthetics of happening,' an orientation beyond the merely rational, where the infinite is encountered as 'bodied forth in sensuous finitude.' Here Desmond draws closest to Milbank's poetic, the apprehension of the artistic representation of being. Third is 'the erotics of selving,' where the self lives in the tension between its finitude and its infinite striving, where each limit – animal, temporal, social, cultural, religious – opens beyond, pointing 'to a measure exceeding finite measure.' Finally there is the 'agapeics of community,' where the self opens-out in a receptivity to the gift of the other in a supernatural charity that exceeds every moral law or stipulation, a movement towards the other that is simultaneously an opening out to transcendence. This 'pointing beyond,' this ontological excess, this hyperbole of being is both for Desmond and Milbank 'an original dynamism of being that cannot be finalized or fixed.'

Conclusion

In this chapter the diverse threads of the previous chapters are woven together as the mobility of the self and its cultural constructions find their ultimate articulation in the kenotic and ecstatic movements of the Trinity. In chapter one, the radically questioning self became dislocated from its relationship with 'divine attention' and so was lost in a

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150 In ibid., 135.
151 Ibid., 136.
homeless wandering in an alien and wounding world. A disjunction was articulated as human making – its world of culture, language and history, of self-expression and construction – was sundered from its divine telos through the invention of the secular. A self in violent competition with others, in which constructions of meaning could only be conflictual and fragmentary, was imagined, a self conceived merely as an atomistic assertion of arbitrary will. Culture as ‘an arena of soul-making’ – the creation of a shared world of identity, language and community – dissolved into an arena of warfare. Now a full retrieval of culture is made possible as the self is reconstituted in a language of kenosis and poetics, the repetition-in-difference of divine gift and as desire is reordered in terms of dispossession and excess.

In chapter 2, the self was mobilised in its encounter with divine desire as the infinite was taken up into the infinity of God. This ascent was not inward or individualistic, but rather a movement upward and outward in sacramental and virtuous relationality, an ‘active receptivity’ to divine gift. The self’s very fragile mobility opened it up to the possibilities of redemption. With Augustine, desire, language and identity were imagined beyond violence and in terms of peaceful donation, radically dependent on the prior act of God in Christ, the confrontation with divine eros. Finally, the self’s creative shaping of its world was transmuted from an isolated sphere of secular autonomy into one of theurgic participation. God’s decent into the very materiality of the self and its world is what makes the deification of the self possible. In this chapter, the self’s confrontation with the apophatic mystery of God and its enfolding in the dislocations of divine desire has taken this movement further, and theurgic participation has been given its fullest articulation.

In chapter 3, the movement of the self through language, history, community and culture was also seen as a movement of kenosis and ascent. First, with Hegel, as an endless dispossession as identity is found, lost and reconstructed as identity is risked in a vulnerable mutuality with the other. And also, with Vico, as the poetic excesses of human making anticipate the creative artificing of God in the expression of the Logos, itself participating in a divine narrative of the peaceful restoration and reconciliation of the human world. This chapter’s focus on the Dostoevskian author as it kenotically makes space for the voice and freedom of the other in a shared articulation of its world extends
the Hegelian sense of a vulnerable mutuality. And its twin focus on repetition and poiesis deepens the Vichian trajectory that articulates an alternative vision of the modern.

In chapter 4 the kenotic and poetic movements of the self as its shapes its world were given an ecclesial and liturgical focus. The Church, as 'an arena for the soul,' provided a narrative and practice of the self beyond rivalry and suspicion in which the self could be articulated as gift, sacrament and sign. The liturgical mobility of the self was explored once more in terms of loss and recovery, kenosis and ascent, death and resurrection. Finally, it was hinted that the divine excesses of the Trinity are actually to be discerned in the kenotic and dispossessive moments of the Church and its history as God makes himself known in the life-of-the-other. Christ crucified is the pattern of God’s abundant glory. Now the theme of repetition draws the self into the movement of Christ’s own life, a movement that takes an eschatological trajectory towards the re-making of the cosmos, and the way of the cross becomes nothing less than the apophatic ascent of the self into the mystery of the divine.

In this final chapter the confluence between Williams and Milbank in the whole area of culture – the mobile constructions of the self, the expressive fragility of its language, its desire and its world – and Trinitarian dynamics comes into sharpest focus. Once more Williams emphasises the kenotic displacements of desire, while Milbank stresses the poetic excesses of the self, but what is important for both is the mobility of the self as it moves though time, articulates itself through language, and sculpts and is sculpted by culture. This very mobility, taking the pattern of an endless kenosis and ascent, is nothing less than the infinite movements and displacements of desire that constitute the life of the Trinity.

There are clear distinctions in their respective visions of the Trinity. Williams focusses on kenosis and dispossession, the costly displacements of love that de-centre the ego and its 'system-spinning,' and open it out to the painful deflections of desire. Milbank, on the other hand, imagines the Trinity as a surplus of creative expression, and the self as endlessly dynamic, creatively participating in the generative expression of Trinitarian life. But even as Williams stresses difference and distance and Milbank affinity and participation, what emerges for both is a dramatic re-articulation of an ancient Christian anthropological vision now understood in terms of particularity, language and culture.
Here is the self, moving 'in alignment with the purpose of God, habitually echoing in finite form the infinite desire of God for God, of love for love.'\textsuperscript{153}

\textsuperscript{153} Williams, "Nature, Passion and Desire," 267.
Conclusion

Cornelius Ernst writes about the creative paradox at the heart of Christianity, 'a pregnant junction' between 'the pneumatic power to transform cultural traditions,' and 'the hidden God, Deus absconditus who has made his transcendence known in the darkness of a death.'\(^1\) It is this 'pregnant junction' between the pneumatic power that transforms culture and the transcendence of God known in the kenosis of the cross that I have placed my narration of the self. This is an endlessly mobile self caught up in the cultural transformations of desire, language and materiality, transformations themselves made possible by the kenotic movements of the divine as it confronts the self in its vulnerability and giftedness.

The self is an act of poiesis, a repetition-in-difference of the creative impulse of God, itself the sculptor of language, history, identity and culture through the expressive shapings of its own materiality. But the bestowal that makes this poetic gift of the self possible is shown in the very distance that is opened out between God and the self in which creation happens: the kenotic loss of self that allows the other its freedom to be. And yet, paradoxically, this kenosis is itself an act of utter freedom, the creative act par excellence, and so why gift always takes a kenotic shape: the kenotic movements of bestowal at the heart of the Trinity, the kenosis of creatio ex nihilo, the self-emptying of incarnation and the cross. But for the human self to participate in this endless poetic generativity, for it to birth new worlds of meaning, it too must learn its own kenosis, like an author generating a new freedom for their characters and narratives, no longer simply embodiments of au-

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thorial will, but rather of loving attention. This is a kind of death so that the other might live. Or as the apostle Paul writes, 'death is at work in us, but life in you.'

Even as kenosis is an opening out towards freedom, it is also an acknowledgement of limit. And here a second paradox is articulated, that it is only in this acknowledgement of limit that the true giftedness of the self can be learned. The self is utterly implicated in the material, its embodiment, language, particularity and history, and so its perspective is always from this particular place at this particular time. But it is also implicated in a larger story than itself, its speech is the language of another, it is situated in the stories of others, it comes into being in a world of other limited perspectives that are not its own. This means that the world in which it finds itself is a world of failure as well as promise, of misinterpretation as well as meaning, a world that is characterised by loss. There is the need for a certain woundedness of the self. As Gillian Rose writes, 'a soul which is not bound is as mad as one with cemented boundaries. To grow in love-ability is to accept the boundaries of oneself and others, while remaining vulnerable, woundable, around the bounds.' I have argued that this sense of boundedness and limit is not the curse of the self, but rather the costly gift of its own particularity, its unrepeatable voice, its unique perspective.

If the kenotic self knows itself in the tension generated by freedom and limit, then with the theurgic self we encounter the Neoplatonic ascent transformed. Plotinus furnishes us with a vision of ascent as that of a sculptor shaping form out of matter.

Act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smoothes there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work ... never cease chiseling your statue, until there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendour of virtue.

But such a sculpting for Plotinus remains the work of the solitary contemplative, an apophatic activity that carves away the material until the spiritual remains. But why not instead of a chiselling away of the material, a shaping of it? Pseudo-Dionysius takes up and radicalises this sculptural vision as a liturgical clearing away of the 'merely' material, a sculpting of the cosmos that no longer simply reveals the self, but self and God in

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2 2 Corinthians 4.12 NRSV
relationship. But the ascent Dionysius has in mind here is not the apophatic ascent of Plotinus as read by the post-moderns – a celebration of the void – but rather the uncovering of a superabundant plenitude. The chiselling away of stone produces, discovers, more not less, for it is the shaping of the material that enables the excesses of the divine to be seen.

As ascent is subverted and re-imagined by the theurgic self, away from an inward journey of recollection, a backward movement into the abstraction of eternal form, it becomes something more. Now it is a repetition forwards, a courageous discovery of truth in the shaping of the material. In the theurgic Dionysius’ fusion of the contemplative and the liturgical is met by a new stress on the human shaping of history and culture in Vico, and an articulation of the movements of production and exchange – the economic and the political – in Milbank. Such a vision could be pushed further: into the constructions of sexuality and gender, and as we enter into the Anthropocene there is almost an apocalyptic need to understand the theurgic in terms of the environment, the living materiality of our world. As Bulgakov prophetically warns, the gospel imperative ‘exhorts us to be the miracle-workers, not the mechanics of the universe, healers, not medics.’

With the theurgic self we discover an ‘alternative modernity,’ a new emphasis on fabrication as the defining aspect of the human, in which the divide between nature and culture is overcome. In Paradiso, Gillian Rose writes about the return of a certain kind of gnosticism, a gnosticism that imagines a hostile and dangerous world in which materiality is to be forcefully overcome. ‘Gnosticism is founded on dualisms,’ she argues, ‘of matter and reason, of body and soul.’ Evil is embedded in the material which is considered an ‘autonomous material substance,’ but knowledge, through technique, can overcome it.

Gnosticism offers a catastrophic cosmogony: creation is not the work of a loving God, for the Godhead is infinitely removed. Primal man is deposited by maleficent demiurgic Aeons, epochs or ages, who dominate myriad realms of cosmic disorder in space.

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6 Sergii Bulgakov, Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 381.
7 Gillian Rose, Paradiso (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 1999), 26.
8 Ibid., 27.
Such gnosticism is alive and well today in what Milbank would term ‘the secular,’ that arena of human fabrication utterly cut off from divine participation, an arena of *dominium*, of the wilful manipulation of matter by mechanisms of control and technologies of war. How different the theurgic in its shaping of its material world: no longer a battle-ground to dominate or a resource to analyse, dissect and use, but the slow and patient dynamics of *oikeosis*, a ‘becoming at home with’ ourselves, our world, our God.
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