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THE LORD OF LIMITS: ON TRINITARIAN ONTOLOGY AND THE TRAGIC

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Abstract

The essay focuses on a dimension of the trinitarian metaphysics of Rowan Williams. It aims to articulate his understanding of the ontological implications of the Trinity, particularly in relation to his theological leitmotif of the tragic, and has a reparative focus of easing some of the tensions that may arise in such relating. The argument brings focus on the interconnections between trinitarian identity-in-difference and creaturely finitude, showing that Williams's trinitarian ontology articulates a model of metaphysical analogy in which creaturely *limit* and *externality* is grounded in the distinction of the Father and the Son, in a trinitarian circulation of dispossession and reception. This trinitarian movement of giving and receiving forms the principle of created finitude and contingency, exemplified in the experience of "distance" between the crucified Son and the Father. However, this hypostatic distinction is supplemented by a movement of generativity in which self-expenditure is not the mutual annihilation of the dyad of Father and Son, but always already a donation of *identity-in-otherness* in which there is no divine "individuality" prior to relation. Moreover, intratrinitarian love is not merely an erotic movement of self-fulfilment in the other, but *a desire for the desire of the other*, a 'deflection' to *the other of the other*. In the trinitarian logic, this other is conceived as the personal hypostasis of Holy Spirit. Hereby, Williams sustains a grammar of trinitarian aseity while also giving a grounding for finitude within the intratrinitarian difference in which creatures are incorporated, through the Spirit, into the eternal kenosis of the Son.

I

Among contemporary reflections within systematic and philosophical theology, there has been a conceptual revival of trinitarian ontology.[1] Recently, it was the subject of the New Trinitarian Ontologies Conference (2019), hosted at the University of Cambridge (as well as subsequent conferences),[2] and is exemplified *par excellence* in the recent re-publication of

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[1] The title "The Lord of Limits" is a play on W. H. Auden's "The Watchers" ("O Lords of Limit, training dark and light"), and was also the title of Geoffrey Hill's first collection of criticism. The title was initially intended as ascription to the Holy Trinity, but I am now cognisant of the somewhat fiendish word-play at work, since Rowan Williams, of course, was a distinguished lord during the reign of Queen Elizabeth II.

[2] *Trinitarian Ontologies: Towards a Trinitarian Transformation of Philosophy*, ed. Eduard Fiedler and Pavel Frývaldský (Baden-Baden: Karl Aber Verlag, 2025); *New Trinitarian Ontologies*, ed. John Milbank, Ryan Haecker, and J.D. Lyonhart (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2025).

two editions (both in 2020) of Klaus Hemmerle's *Thesen zu einer trinitarischen Ontologie*—a text originally written as a birthday letter to Hans Urs von Balthasar and later published in 1976.[3] However, this moment is indeed a resurgence and not a new fangled affair: the subject of trinitarian ontology has been a recurring theme in modern theology, particularly among German Catholics.[4] However, one may (arguably) trace the original inspiration for the development of trinitarian ontology much further back, as Oeing-Hanhoff suggests, to Augustine's *De trinitate*, and especially his reflections on the *vestigia trinitatis* and its linkage to the relationality of the trinitarian persons.[5] This was taken up by Thomas Aquinas who, in distinction from the Franciscan tradition of trinitarian emanation, understood the Trinity as the substantial relations of Father, Son and Spirit.[6] Playing out against this Augustinian and Thomistic background, trinitarian ontology was seen by Hemmerle as a systematised reflection on the statement that love is "the meaning of Being,"[7] and so understood as the primacy of trinitarian love, relations, and gift. Here, finite being comes under the ancient principle that every caused thing imitates its cause in some way,[8] and ontologically participates in infinite being.[9] Created being images the Trinity by virtue of its createdness and its participation in the life and relations of the trinitarian God, as famously taught by Aquinas.[10] Central here is the metaphysical conceit of analogy, and particularly the analogy of being (*analogia entis*)—hence its special resonance among Catholics—and finds a summation in the statement of Heinrich Beck: *analogia entis ultimatum est analogia trinitatis*.[11]

[3] Klaus Hemmerle, *Thesen zu einer trinitarischen Ontologie*, ed. Wilfried Hagemann and Thomas Norris (Würzburg: Echter, 2020); *Theses towards a Trinitarian Ontology*, trans. Stephen Churchyard (New York: Angelico Press, 2020); cf. John R. Betz, "What's New in the New Trinitarian Ontology? A Commentary on Klaus Hemmerle's *Theses Towards a Trinitarian Ontology*," *Modern Theology* 39, no. 1 (January 2023): 131-58.

[4] Ludger Oeing-Hanhoff in an entry for the *Historiches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* traces its influence through Theodor Haecker, Hans Eduard Hengstenberg, Clemens Kaliba, Klaus Hemmerle, and Heinrich Beck, but this could be extended to include Gustav Siewerth, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, Erich Przywara, Ferdinand Ulrich, and many others who attempted a modern recapitulation of trinitarian metaphysics; Ludger Oeing-Hanhoff, "Ontologie, trinitarische," *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie, Bd. 6* (Basel-Darmstadt: Schwabe Verlag 1984), 1201.

[5] Oeing-Hanhoff, "Ontologie, trinitarische," 1201.

[6] See Russell L. Friedman, *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[7] Hemmerle, *Theses towards a Trinitarian Ontology*, 53.

[8] See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I.4.2; cf. Philipp W. Rosemann, *Omne Agens Agit Sibi Simile: A 'Repetition' of Scholastic Metaphysics* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1996).

[9] Ontological participation refers to any "constitutive structure whereby a being or beings share to varying degrees in a positive quality or perfection that they receive from a donating source that alone enjoys the fullness of this quality of perfection"; Jacob H. Sherman, "A Genealogy of Participation," in *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies*, ed. Jorge N. Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman (Albany, NY: The State University of New York Press, 2008), 82.

[10] Cf. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I.44.1.

[11] See Heinrich Beck, "Analogia Trinitatis: Ein Schlüssel zu Struktur Problemen der Heutigen Welt," *Salzburger Jahrbuch für Philosophie* (1980): 87-99. Recently, Lewis Ayres has also stressed how clarity regarding the principle of analogy is central to the task of trinitarian ontology, and how this vision is obscured in post-metaphysical approaches that remain too indebted to Heideggerian genealogies of metaphysics; cf. Lewis Ayres, "(Mis)Adventures in Trinitarian Ontology," in *Trinity and an Entangled World: Relationality in Physical Science and Theology*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 130-45. Indeed, one may see this proliferation of trinitarian metaphysics among German Catholics, broadly-speaking, as largely part of a sustained response to the dual influence of Heidegger and Barth. See John R. Betz, "Translator's Introduction," in Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis. Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 76-115.

Rowan Williams has also explicitly turned towards articulating a trinitarian ontology of late, as seen in his own contribution to the New Trinitarian Ontologies Conference, but also in recent publications such as the Foreword to Hemmerle's *Theses towards a Trinitarian Ontology*[12] as well as some of the essays in *Looking East in Winter*—which are imprinted with a good dose of Hemmerle.[13] One could also see something of this German Catholic influence in his long engagement with Balthasar,[14] and more recent forays into the analogical metaphysics of Przywara.[15] But arguably it goes back much further: one could trace his interest in the *imago trinitatis* to his doctoral research on Vladimir Lossky and the Eastern Orthodox account of "personhood."[16] Here a kenotic rendering of "the person" is patterned after a trinitarian kenosis in which the self only becomes "personal" to the degree that it renounces autonomous existence, and gives itself for the other: a *self-identity-in-otherness*.[17] The determinative influence of Sergii Bulgakov as regards this kenotic picture of selfhood and the Trinity is also clear.[18] Williams finds similar patterns at work in the writings of Augustine, here attempting to make comparative claims regarding the indissoluble linkage of self-knowledge with the knowledge of the Trinity, against any reading of Augustinian anthropology along the lines of a proto-Cartesian individuality.[19] Moreover, it can be seen in his repeated engagements with G.W.F Hegel and Gillian Rose, as they propose a rupturing of identity through the dialectic of non-identity. Here there is not a collapse of the one pole into the other, but rather a *speculative*

[12] Rowan Williams, "Foreword," in *Theses towards a Trinitarian Ontology*.

[13] I am thinking particularly of Williams's essay "The Embodied Logos: Reason, Knowledge and Relation," in *Looking East in Winter: Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 59-92.

[14] See Rowan Williams, "Balthasar and Difference," in *Wrestling with Angels*: *Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 77-85; Rowan Williams, "Balthasar and the Trinity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37-50.

[15] Rowan Williams, "Dialectic and Analogy: A Theological Legacy," in *The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought*, ed. Nicholas Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 274-292; Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 219-54.

[16] Rowan Williams, *The Theology of Vladimir Lossky* (DPhil diss., Oxford University, 1975), 94-128; cf. Rowan Williams, "The Theology of Personhood: A Study of the Thought of Christos Yannaras," *Sobernost: The Journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius* 6, no. 6 (1972): 415-30. For more, cf. Todd Breyfogle, "Time and Transformation: A Conversation with Rowan Williams," *Cross Currents* 45, no. 3 (1995), 307-8. Williams explicitly mentions Lossky again in a review of Karen Kilby, suggesting that Vladimir Lossky's apophatically-chastened interfacing of the trinity and human sociality is one path forward for a trinitarian ontology that aims, on the one side, to avoid "crypto-polytheism", while also acknowledging an "analogy" between "trinitarian plurality" and "human mutuality"; Rowan Williams, "A True Otherness," *Political Theology* 22, no. 5 (2021): 393-97 (396).

[17] Cf. Vladmir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 144.

[18] See Williams's introduction to the excerpts of *The Lamb of God* in Sergii Bulgakov, *Towards a Russian Political Theology*, trans. and ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 163-81; "Sergii Bulgakov's Christology and Beyond," in *Building the House of Wisdom–Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology*: *New Approaches and Interpretations*, ed. Barbara Hallensleben, et al. (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2024), 25-41. On this influence, see Joshua Pulin Elvy Heath, "Speaking (About) Substance: The Metaphysics of Rowan Williams and Some Russian Philosophers," *Modern Theology* 40, no. 1 (January 2024): 256-81.

[19] Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

vision that attempts to sustain both identity *and* difference, the particular *and* the universal, within the broken representations of the political.[20]

In this essay, however, my aim is not a complete restatement of his trinitarian metaphysic, but to juxtapose it with his theological rendering of finitude, contingency, and the tragic.[21] This can be seen, at least partially, as a refraction of the divine simplicity and impassibility debate—which I will not rehash here. Williams, at least in his mature period, adheres to a relatively traditional account of divine aseity and simplicity, a view which appears incompatible with a "tragic theology" à la Berdyaev or Moltmann.[22] Overall, his trinitarian ontology is grammatically ordered by a non-competitive, non-dualistic account of transcendence and immanence,[23] and is resistant to projecting drama or any historical tension onto the Holy Trinity,[24] insofar as this collapses the qualitative, *non-aliud* distinction between creator and creature.[25] Mike Higton correctly remarks that for Williams "History, drama, and contingency, the contest of wills, the meeting of needs, the resolving of tensions, characterize creation, not the Creator."[26] Nonetheless, the connection between the Trinity and the tragic was provoked several years ago by Benjamin Myers:

> Even the life of God resists gratification. The Son eternally unconsoled, eternally broken, by the love of the Father; the Father is eternally devastated and displaced by the gift of his being to the receptive Son; and a third agency, the Spirit, is the constant evacuation of fantasy, a dark night poised between God and God, light and light. If tragedy means a total lack of completion and consolation, then it is hard to avoid concluding that there is something very like a tragedy going on forever between the persons of the trinity.[27]

[20] Rowan Williams, "Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity," "Logic and Spirit in Hegel," "Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose," in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 25-34; 35-50; 53-76; "'The Sadness of the King': Gillian Rose, Hegel, and the Pathos of Reason," *Telos* 173 (Winter 2015): 21-36. In Rose, this gives way to a politics of dispossession and self-displacement, one that problematises the prioritisation of any one pole over the other, whether this be of the one over the many, of the self and the other, of law and ethics, suggesting continual negotiations between these polarities that are never frozen into the one or the other. The metaphysical implications of this are expanded by Williams into kenotic and trinitarian directions as a suggestive way for understanding the *agon* of politics.

[21] Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); cf. Khegan Delport, *On Tragedy and Transcendence: An Essay on the Metaphysics of Donald MacKinnon and Rowan Williams* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2021).

[22] In his youth, Williams did express some affinity for Moltmann's *The Crucified God*, but his theological maturation has demonstrated a significant distance from the account contained therein; see "Barth on the Triune God", in *Wrestling with Angels*, 136. And despite his wider appreciation of Russian Orthodoxy, Williams has little taste for the metaphysics of Berdyaev; see Todd Breyfogle, "Time and Transformation: A Conversation with Rowan Williams," *Cross Currents* 45 (1995), 308.

[23] Most extensively unpacked in *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), esp. 1-40; 219-54.

[24] Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2003), 49. Cf. Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and* Tradition (rev. ed, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 241, where he says, regarding the Athanasian picture of God, that it "absolutely rules out a 'history in God'; there are no transactions in eternity."

[25] Cf. Williams, "Balthasar and Difference," in *Wrestling with Angels*, 80.

[26] Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004), 45.

[27] Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: T& T Clark: 2012), 112.

This account appears to be authorised by Williams's own engagements with the likes of John of the Cross, Balthasar and Bulgakov, as well as his remarks on tragic negativity as belonging to "what is utterly unresolved in the human experience."[28] "Tragedy" or "the tragic" are of course notoriously difficult to essentialise, but they can be linked, in general, to the aesthetic representation of suffering and loss, dramatic or historical irony, belated knowledge, self-destructive ignorance, the play of freedom and determination, and so on. It is precisely for this reason why there might a problematic correlation between tragedy and the Trinity. Williams resists any ascription of contingency and imperfection to the intratrinitarian life of God. For him, this is a mythologizing and transcendentalizing of Being's fragmentation, thus expanding the *contingent* necessity of tragic loss into a kind of *absolute* necessity—what he calls "some supertemporal principle or existential curse."[29]

With these qualifications in mind, all of this, nevertheless, does raise the spectre of dogmatic and systematic clarity, especially regarding those occasions when Williams does appear to bring the Trinity into a conceptual and existential relationship with the tragic. In view of Williams's commitment to an asymmetric taxis of transcendence and immanence, and his refusal of any conflictual theory of divine-human relations, one may ask in what sense does Williams understand the connection between Trinity and tragic contingency. This is substantialised further by Williams's resistance to an eschatological cancellation of the tragic, which he has described as "an absolute ending which obliterates the cost of what has gone before."[30] The significance of the tragic, and its impact on human lives and bodies, cannot be simply obviated—even, it seems, within the beatific vision.

In this essay I will wager a "reparative" reading of Williams's trinitarian ontology, attempting to bring together tendrils of his theological argument as they have developed over the past several decades. However, admittedly, there is also an element of the *constructive* and *speculative* here, insofar as I will be attempting to unfurl implications of his trinitarian metaphysics that he has not made explicit pronouncements on, even as there are enough hints to suggest where one could take his argument. On the one hand, it attempts to limn the outlines of his trinitarian ontology, something that is only beginning to be done,[31] even as it ranges over a wider body of texts. On the other side, it aims to provide some amelioration to the tensions that may appear when his trinitarian ontology is related to his theory of the tragic, and in this sense my aims are reparative. A systematic restatement of his views on the tragic will not be the focus here, since this has been accomplished elsewhere at greater length.[32] Rather, it aims to give a trinitarian supplementation to his mature theology of the tragic in a way that has not been attempted as expansively before.[33]

The outline and exposition of this metaphysic will come in the following sections, but by way of anticipation I will hazard a summary of Williams's approach here.

[28] Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 1.

[29] Ibid., 113. I take the logic of *absolute* or *contingent* necessity from David Tracy's "On Tragic Wisdom," in *Wrestling with God and Evil: Philosophical Reflections*, ed. Hendrik M. Vroom (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 13-24.

[30] Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 114-15.

[31] Cf. Heath, "Speaking (About) Substance."

[32] Khegan M. Delport, "Of Danger and Difficulty: Rowan Williams and the Tragic Imagination," *The Heythrop Journal* 61 (2020): 505-20; "The Self in Fragments: On Rowan Williams's Tragicomic Augustinianism," *Journal of Anglican Studies* 19, no. 1 (2021): 98-115; *On Tragedy and Transcendence*, 206-49.

[33] For a helpful account of Williams's trinitarian theology, though penned before his more recent metaphysical forays in his Gifford and Hulsean Lectures, see Andrew Moody, "The Hidden Center: Trinity and Incarnation in the Negative (and Positive) Theology of Rowan Williams," in *Rowan Williams: Critical Essays*, ed. Matheson Russell (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 25-46.

Overall, his integration of trinitarian ontology and the tragic can be grasped like this: Trihypostatic Being is the eternal correspondence of God to God through God within the identity-in-difference of the trinitarian persons. It is the differentiation of Father, Son, and Spirit—namely, the Father as Unbegotten Source, the eternal generation of the Son as Word and Image and the procession of the Spirit as Gift and Love—that grounds the asymmetric, ontological differentiation of creator and creature. In this light, *creaturely finitude* is grounded analogically in God's self-differentiation and non-identical repetition as Father, Son, and Spirit.

As I hope to show, it is within his account of trinitarian differentiation that we should understand his reference to divine desire insofar as this implies a lack of "closure" and an unending restiveness between the trinitarian persons: the Father eternally desires the Son and the Son the Father and the "excess" of this desire and love, *the desire of the other's desire*, is itself the Spirit. However, this lack of closure does not imply something like an "eternal tragedy" *within* the Trinity, but is rather a way of expounding the dynamism of perichoresis, of identity-within-difference, as well as a kenotic self-displacement without self-annihilation. For Williams, trinitarian differentiation implies an eternal non-identical repetition and return within the divine life that undermines an ontological analysis of a simple return to identity. Identity is always in difference and difference in identity. It is precisely these substantial relations that underpin his reception of Donald MacKinnon's application of an *analogy of limits* to the divine life, and Williams's own qualified appropriation of these terms (as I will show later). The language of "limits" is an attempt to think how the "externality" of Father and Son (revealed incarnationally) provides an ontological basis within the divine life for creaturely finitude—and, as a consequence, potential tragedy. However, the language of *limit* or *distance*, as revealed in the experiential distance of the crucified Jesus from the Father, is not merely regulative in the "Kantian" sense of transcendental limits. The demarcation of hypostases does operate, in some way, as a *negative* regulation of distinct terms: the Father is *not* the Son, the Son is *not* Father, the Spirit is *not* the Son or the Father and so on. However, this is enfolded within a trinitarian logic of difference and gratuity where "distance" and "dispossession" gives forth to the *non-aliud* distinction of the trinitarian persons in which the self-giving of the Father to the Son and the Son to the Father is always already not the giving of an isolated identity but an *identity-in-otherness*, an otherness which is expressed in the erotic life of the Trinity. However, this desire is not merely directed at self-fulfilment but *a desire for the desire of the other*, for *the other of the other*, a hypostatic otherness which for Williams is one way of understanding the Augustinian rendering of the Spirit as Love and Gift. Hypostatic identity is not a matter of discrete individuality, but always identity-in-relation. Hereby, Being itself is understood as relational, generative, and grounded in an eternal act of perichoretic love and receptivity, as manifest in the self-giving of the cross.

II

The beginning of trinitarian ontology is *the event of the economic Trinity*.[34] The divine economy is the revelation of the Holy Trinity within history. The manifestation of the Trinity in the temporal order of creation reveals to us the eternal nature of God: it is a

[34] Hemmerle, *Theses towards a Trinitarian Ontology*, 54

communication of the divine nature, and not merely a divine accommodation or modulation for the purposes of salvation history. On this picture, creation is not an irruption within the intratrinitarian life, but an expression of the uncontainable plenitude of divine love. The creation, ordering, and vivification of finite being are an outpouring of the eternal movement of Paternity, Sonship, and Spiration. Finite creation thus only has its existence through a participation in the eternal trinitarian life, and in this way it "images" ontologically and apophatically something of the divine nature, and through salvific transformation, from glory to glory, the image of the Trinity. The *analogia entis* and the *analogia trinitatis* are grounded in this interrelation of divine economy and theology. The trinitarian economy is summarised in the act in which "God communicates or 'interprets' himself to the world by the mediation of Word and Spirit."[35] Trinitarian life and the world are hereby brought together in an analogical correlation that maintains the participation of finite life in infinite divinity without cancelling the ever-greater qualitative distinction. Ontological reflection may, in its most comprehensive scope, therefore take a trinitarian shape because of this ultimate conditioning, even as it always remains mediated by creaturely limitation. For Rowan Williams (and Klaus Hemmerle), the very processes of differentiation and relation in the finite world are disclosive of the trinitarian source of reality: our being is placed in a responsive environment in which we are always already reacting and engaging, situated within "a flow of agency that does not originate in a fixed and context-free interiority." Our being and thinking is always already in "the process of agency or energy unceasingly moving 'out' from self-identity into relation." Being is movement, motion, and energy, complicating any boundary between self-contained identity and alienating otherness. The processual traversing and relational mixing of entities resists a reduction of ontic beings to atomistic essences; rather, it intimates a kind of "renunciation" that belongs to the definition of identity itself, a process of ceding and relinquishment so that the nature of what *is* can only be thought together with what it is *not*.[36]

For Williams, a trinitarian ontology relates how "the shape of finite reality" as non-identical repetition is grounded in "the non-identical repetition that is the divine life." Being itself—*that which is*—is "always necessarily action that generates its reflection in difference."[37] For Williams, Trihypostatic Being is an eternal "non-dual non-identity," a "non-identical repetition" and "self-correspondence" whereby "God is God in acting so as to be God *to* God." Namely, that "God is God as generating God's perfect reflection *and* God is God in the generativity of that reflection itself as it returns to its source—as Source and Word and Spirit simultaneously."[38] Revelation and the divine economy shows that *non-dual non-identity* is not an "unexpected extra item in the universe but of *the character of active existence itself*," that Trinity and incarnation ultimately give forth into ontology. It tells us that there is "nothing more fundamental to be said than the affirmation that the pure act, the unconstrained and unlimited initiative on which all finite reality depends, is itself relational," namely, the Trinity, which is "the eternal pattern of identity in otherness," "a love that overflows in and for what is not, for the finite world that arises, freely but not arbitrarily, out of the nature of God as gift and as giver."[39] The doctrine of the Trinity informs us

[35] Rowan Williams, "Word and Spirit," in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 110.
[36] Rowan Williams, "Foreword," in *Theses towards a Trinitarian Ontology*, 2-3.
[37] Williams, "The Embodied Logos: Reason, Knowledge and Relation," in *Looking East in Winter*, 85.
[38] Ibid., 80.
[39] Williams, "Foreword," in *Theses towards a Trinitarian Ontology*, 4.

that "the very life of God is a yielding or giving-over into the life of an Other, a 'negation' in the sense of refusing to settle for the idea that normative life or personal identity is to be conceived in self-enclosed and self-sufficient units."[40] Negation or negativity in this context clearly has a kenotic register, implying a ceding of *self-sufficient* identity—a theme that recurs throughout Williams's writings, as we will see.

Overall, Williams's account is an *ekstatic* theory of trinitarian doctrine,[41] in which the persons of the Trinity are simply a movement of *other*-directed love in which each person gives itself to the other, and thereby divests its being for the sake of the Other, without however the dissolution of the trinitarian persons. The Father gives Himself wholly to the Son in eternal generation and the Son wholly to the Father in an eternal and kenotic dispossession. However, this twoness is not a kind of egoism (*égoïsme à deux*), or a simple return within the identity of self-reflection—a sort of bad infinity. In the Trinity, the Father's generation of the Son as His self-knowledge and self-reflection ushers forth into the plenitude of love between the Father and Son which is understood as Spirit, a non-identical repetition in knowledge and love. In this context of infinite self-abnegation and love, desire is never completed or terminated in the Other but rather continues to be "deflected," so that we can say that there is a *non-closure* of desire within the Godhead which cannot be terminated because it is deflected in a perennial movement and "excess" of perichoretic love.[42] This pattern of trinitarian *ekstasis*, in turn, is also the conditioning reality of all finite being, constituting a world established through *logos*, as its transcendent organising principle, and a metaphysical *eros* that is *self-relativizing* and *self-displacing*.[43] These trinitarian distinctions are the paradigmatic context for his account of trinitarian desire, that is, the way in which Father, Son, and Spirit are involved in an eternal movement of desiring relations that never comes to a static terminus; and that it is, in turn, this reality which grounds and stimulates created beings's own irreducible and unending erotic energy—as seen in Williams's writings on Augustine.

For Augustine only God can be truly "enjoyed" for God's own sake; all other things should be "used" for the higher purpose of entering into the life of the triune God; this does not imply that these "used" things are merely disposable or that they can be commandeered for ideological pretensions (in the name of God). Instead, by saying that created things (as signs) point us towards God, and therefore should not be enjoyed for themselves, we can affirm that there is no end to our desire, so that our desire cannot be exhausted by any object within the creaturely plane. Such an acknowledgement preserves the "objectivity" of the world over against an ego which would try to consume it in the hope of coming to an "end" of desire.[44] In this trajectory, Williams distances Augustine from any proto-Cartesianism as regards selfhood.[45] The image of God in the human being reflects "a movement into our own createdness," a journey towards justice and wisdom,

[40] Williams, "Author's Introduction," in *Wrestling with Angels*, xiii.

[41] Ibid., xiii.

[42] The language of "excess" and "deflection" will be discussed below in his reading of John of the Cross.

[43] Williams, "Nature, Passion and Desire: The Excessiveness of Being," in *Looking East in Winter*, 49.

[44] Williams, "Language, Reality and Desire: The Nature of Christian Formation," in *On Augustine*, 41-58.

[45] For Augustine (according to Williams), there is not a solitary ego that can understand itself apart from relation with God. We cannot properly apprehend ourselves apart from the self-giving movement of love into which we are taken. This is "the only way of knowing ourselves truthfully" ("Sapientia and the Trinity," in *On Augustine*, 175).

that reflects in turn "our movement into God's own life as turned 'outwards.'"[46] The "introspective method" of *De trinitate*, for example, does not cede to individualism or a Cartesian ego, but rather seeks to "demythologise" such an individualistic psychology by "establishing the life of the mind firmly in relation to God."[47] The image of God for Augustine is not located in the mind *per se* but rather in *the mind of the saint*, that is, the one who practices justice and love.[48] This grounds Augustine's theological anthropology: human personhood as *imago dei* is always oriented to the *imago trinitatis*, so that "our self-knowledge is not *as such* in God's image until it becomes a knowledge of our dependence on God's prior action" and moreover is bound up with "the common life and its disciplines" so that "the turn inwards is—paradoxically—not a turning away from relation with others any more than relation with the creator."[49]

A similar vision comes to the fore in his reading of the trinitarian theology of Aquinas.[50] The Angelic Doctor suggests that the movement towards the Other in the immanent Trinity cannot be understood literally as a movement "outwards" or a "procession" in the same sense that creation is an outward movement. It is a movement of intellection, of knowledge, and of love. It implies no physical change: analogous to the human mind, it is a spiritual movement whereby the object of intellection comes to "inhabit" us in some immaterial way.[51] In Aquinas's parlance, divine intellection is grounded in God's existence as *verbum*, the Word of God, generated out of God's act of "speaking": "The Father generates the Son in the act of knowing that he (the Father) is already actively giving what he is to another, and that in knowing that primordial and eternal giving he also knows all the relations in which divine life can stand to anything that is not divine."[52] Here again, the Father's self-knowledge in the Son becomes a paradigm for God's relation to creation: "what the Father knows is neither the divine essence as some abstraction from the actuality of divine life, nor 'himself' as a divine individual: he knows himself in generative relation to another."[53] Williams invokes the analogy of the Möbius strip (an image he uses elsewhere[54]) to illustrate that for Aquinas "it isn't possible … to separate out a prior agent (the Father), an act of generation (the begetting of the Son) and the consciousness of that act (the formation of the *verbum* within the divine life)."[55] Here we can see again Williams's argument that there cannot be independent subjects within the Trinity, but rather divine persons who know themselves precisely within their relations and mutual dependence. Such an understanding of divine intellection and co-inherence lays the ground for his reflections on divine desire.

The repetition of the Father's self-knowledge within the generation of the Son is non-identical, so that the "intellectual procession results in a sort of repetition in

[46] Williams, "Sapientia and the Trinity," 175.

[47] Ibid., 186.

[48] Williams, "The Paradoxes of Self-knowledge in *De trinitate*," in *On Augustine*, 167.

[49] Williams, "Time and Self-Awareness in the Confessions," in *On Augustine*, 23.

[50] Rowan Williams, "What does Love Know? St. Thomas on the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 82, no. 964 (2001): 260-72.

[51] Ibid., 261-62.

[52] Ibid., 263.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Williams, "Balthasar and Difference," in *Wrestling with Angels*, 83.

[55] Williams, "What Does Love Know?" 263. For similar reflections in this line, see also Rowan Williams, "A Society of Two? Austin Farrer on the Trinity," in *Austin Farrer for Today: A Prophetic Agenda*, ed. Richard Harries and Stephen Platten (London: SCM, 2020), 141-153.

another medium of the known" not sheer knowledge or an image since "the relation of love or will does not produce an image" but an *inclinatio*, in which the object takes on another life in the subject, such as within the relation of lover and beloved, so that the "loved continues its life in the lover as a stimulus to motion away from itself, a stimulus to a kind of self-abandonment."[56] For Aquinas, according to Williams, knowledge implies a *continuity* within the subject and object relation, while love implies a *discontinuity* between the lover and the beloved. On this reading, *knowledge* comes to be equated with a kind of identity, while *loving* with difference: "Knowing is the other coming to be in the subject, love is the acknowledgment that the other remains other, even in the subject."[57] This relates to Aquinas's pneumatology and impinges upon Williams's proposal of a intratrinitarian movement of desire: since "God loves God, loves what is understood in the eternal Word, loves the always pre-existing self-giving of the Father," one may also say that "God is present to God or in God not simply as the self-image generated by knowledge, but as what exceeds that repetition or reproduction, as the stimulus of what a modern (not Thomas) might want to call, tentatively and analogically, desire."[58] Within the Trinity then, as everywhere, there is no repetition without difference, and it is this difference and distinction of the persons that grounds the objectivity of the beloved. Here, the divine persons are understood within a context of fundamental co-inherence, so that we cannot understand the Trinity as "individual" centres of consciousness, but rather as a movement or process of knowledge-intellection, and love-desire in which "knowledge" and "intellection" act as models for divine co-inherence, perichoresis, and identity, while "love" and "desire" preserve the "objectivity" of the divine persons, which forms, secondly, the basis for a journey of infinite and never-ending desire within the Godhead itself.

In distinction from Aquinas, John of the Cross offers a somewhat richer lexicon and imagery for thinking trinitarian desire.[59] For him, negative theology is traceable not only to the fact of human finitude but is grounded in "the *relations* of divine life" itself rather than some "essence" lying behind the triune life of God.[60] The language of love as "excessiveness" returns again, in which "the love of the Father, the love of the Son and the excess of their mutual love which is the Spirit also constitute the divine life or essence, three agents of one love, one recipient of love in three modes."[61] The play of identity and otherness, of non-identical repetition, plays out once more:

> The single life of the Godhead is the going-out from self-identity into the other; that cannot be a closed mutuality (for then the other would be only the mirror of the same); the love of one for other must itself open on to a further otherness if it is not to return to the same; and only so is the divine life 'as a whole' constituted as love (rather than mutual reinforcement of identity). If so, the designation of both Spirit

[56] Williams, "What Does Love Know?" 264-65.
[57] Ibid., 265.
[58] Ibid., 272.
[59] Rowan Williams, "The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure," in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and the Incarnation*, edited by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 115-35.
[60] Ibid., 116.
[61] Ibid., 118.

> and divine essence as love makes sense: it is the Spirit as excess of divine love that secures the character of God-as-such.[62]

Williams characterises such "excess" through the language of "deflection," by which he means that the intratrinitarian love of the Son for the Father and the Father for the Son does not "terminate" in the desirous object, but is "deflected" by *the desire for the desire of the other*, *the other of the other*, that "beyond" which in the trinitarian schema is identified with the Spirit. Our participation within the trinitarian life is therefore an incorporation into this reflexive circulation of desire, "a transcription into the circumstances of the world of the divine excess and displacements of love."[63] He also goes on to show how this elucidates other more well-known aspects of sanjuanist teaching: the spiritual "experience" of "the night of sense" may also be grounded in this trinitarian deflection insofar as the desire of divine persons does not come to rest within a final object but is continually circulated: our own desire for God cannot come to rest within a determinate object. God cannot be approached as an object among other objects, something stable onto which we can latch our fantastical projections. For indeed, God is *non aliud* not only for us but even *within* the trinitarian life.

Echoing themes which will be repeated in his reading of Balthasar and Bulgakov, it is Christ's dereliction on the cross, the height of creaturely distance from the Father, that reveals that even within God there is no determinate object of final consolation but a continuing deferral. Jesus's experience of Godforsakenness reveals the *non aliud* transcendence of the Father, a movement which we ourselves are taken into through the vicissitudes of prayer and the spiritual life in the "excess" of the Spirit.[64] The participation in the trinitarian life is seen when our "acts become God's in the process whereby we come to long and love with God's longing and loving"; however such "can only be realised in us through emptiness, since God desires no 'object' but God, no satisfaction except the eternal continuance of an outpouring into the other."[65] Hereby, I become the "site" of "the self-displacing love of the Trinity," a place where "the eternal movement of dispossession is being enacted."[66] Here, we can see something of that intratrinitarian *negativity* and lack of consolation alluded to earlier which may have analogical connections to his treatment of the tragic—which become more prominent in the texts to be discussed now.

III

In an essay on the incarnation and Trinity, Donald MacKinnon, a former teacher of Williams, proposes for trinitarian doctrine what he calls an *analogy of limits*, a move comparable to the *analogia personarum*.[67] Here, MacKinnon is involving himself unabashedly in questions of ontology,[68] of the relations between temporality and eternity, between Christ

[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid., 119-20.
[64] Ibid., 121-22.
[65] Ibid., 126.
[66] Ibid., 129.
[67] Donald MacKinnon, "The Relation of the Doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity," in *Themes in Theology: The Three-Fold Cord* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 145-67.
[68] Here against a purely "functionalist" reading of Christology in the wake of Oscar Cullman.

as the Logos of creation and Christ as a historical actor, subject to the estrangements of time and history. He seeks to speculate on the ontological conditions for Christ's "total receptivity" and how it relates to a kenotic Christology of "infinite self-abnegation" (a phrase taken from W.R. Inge).[69] MacKinnon's treatment throughout is heavily imprinted by Balthasar, and especially his *Mysterium Paschale*, particularly in conceiving how the eternal being of God may be placed at "risk" by the venture of creation, in the sense that divine self-consistency needs to be maintained in relation to creation—with all its finitude and tragic limitation. Even though MacKinnon maintains that the divine relation to creation is "asymmetrical," and therefore transcendent, nonetheless he wants to argue that the historical experience of receptivity and dependence is "expressive" of God's "eternal relatedness."[70] Hereby Christ's "sheerly precarious existence" is grounded in God's "ultimate humility,"[71] and it is precisely the kenosis of Christ which reveals "the *arcana* of divine condescension"[72]—which is the ground for what he calls *the analogy of limits*.

Now of course MacKinnon knows that such an analogy is ordered by an apophatic grammar and "triadic aseity,"[73] but he does believe that Christian theology needs to give an ontological account of the mythic language of divine "descent,"[74] that kind of boundary-crossing which seems to be implicit in the language of incarnation. It is this notion of the boundary or limit—which MacKinnon links to the Greek locution of πέρας—that provides an analogy for the relation of time to eternity within this essay. For, as he says, it is through "the actuality of limit" that the Son in his "eternal receptivity" is constituted.[75] He unpacks this more, giving it a specifically tragic tone, saying that if "we suppose that in the theology of the Trinity an *analogia personarum* can be complemented by an analogy of *limits* … it may go some way towards grounding within the eternal, the essentially human element of temporality, the sense of inescapable limitation."[76] Indeed, for MacKinnon, the doctrine of incarnation implies that for Christ "to be human was to be subject to the sort of fragmentation of effort, curtailment of design, interruption of purpose, distraction of resolve that belongs to temporal experience."[77] Earlier, MacKinnon had made explicit comparisons with the gospel narrative and the story of Antigone,[78] and MacKinnon wonders whether an *analogy of limits* might be able to relate ontologically this "complex discipline of temporality" to the immanent Trinity so that the "acceptance of the often tragic consequences that spring from its obstinate, ineluctable truncation of human effort" might be predicated of "the very substance of Jesus' defeat."[79] This interrelation of economic and immanent Trinity suggests that the kenosis of the divine Son can be "interpreted as a painfully realized transcription into the conditions of our existence, of the receptivity, the defined, even if frontierless, receptivity that constitutes his person."[80] For MacKinnon, it is trinitarian theology that makes this economic "transcription" a possibility. What MacKinnon is

[69] MacKinnon, "The Relation of the Doctrines," 151.
[70] Ibid., 159.
[71] Ibid., 160.
[72] Ibid., 161.
[73] Ibid., 162.
[74] Ibid., 159.
[75] Ibid., 162.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., 154.
[79] Ibid., 162-63.
[80] Ibid., 163.

suggesting here is that the possibility for creaturely temporality, finitude and tragedy should be found within the self-differentiation of the triune persons, that "sheer externality" of the Father and Son which lays the foundation for Jesus's own life that becomes "paradigmatically, *creaturely*, distanced from God."[81] In this light, Christ's historical "defeat," his "final" and "haunting receptivity," is displayed in the gospel itself in which Christ does not seek mastery but a kenotic unhanding in which "tragic failure" is "not mastered" or "accepted" but "lived through and met by agony."[82]

Williams seems to endorse something comparable to MacKinnon's proposal. In a text originally published in a *Festschrift* for MacKinnon,[83] Williams covered similar themes, such as the relationship between Trinity, ontology, and contingency. Williams echoes MacKinnon's critique of any confection of reality to a system of necessities, a move MacKinnon saw as a part of the legacy of idealism, and which MacKinnon opposed strenuously throughout his career for metaphysical and moral reasons. For our purposes, one of the reasons he could not accept the idealist picture of the world was due to its tendency to deny the reality of *contingency* or *externality*, that is, that certain things or facts may arise not out of an in-built system of relations or entailments, leading to monism, but that history could generate novel or unforeseen outcomes distinct from already-existing matrices of relations. MacKinnon addresses various aspects of this debate throughout his life, but one of the main things he sought to emphasise was the way this picture of the world tended to occlude the fact of *tragic* contingency. In the essay discussed above, MacKinnon related this to doctrinal questions of incarnation and the Trinity, and here Williams takes something of that concern forward. Like MacKinnon, the language of *limit* and *externality* are appropriated as speaking of the relation between God and creation, and taken into Trinitarian directions suggesting that it is the intratrinitarian difference of the Son and the Father that grounds contingency, receptivity, and dependence. In fact, if we are going to speak of the *homoousion*, according to Williams, we will have to speak of God not merely *parabolically* in relation to worldly limit, particularity, and finitude, but speak of God as *paradoxically* involved in creatureliness. Commenting on the analogy of limits, and adopting the language of "internal" and "external" relations—alluding to G.E. Moore's critique of F.H. Bradley[84]—Williams writes that

> If we are to speak of God in terms of Jesus, we must say that in God there is that which makes possible identity-in-difference—indeed, identity in distance or in absence—of Jesus and who or what he calls Father: something approaching the 'externality' of creator and creation, yet decisively not that, but a mutually constitutive presence, and internal relation of terms …. Creation in its 'externality' to God and its 'externality' within itself can be so because the life of the creator is what it unchangingly is in a relation we only perceive as something teasingly and disturbingly like self-negation; but *not* that.[85]

[81] Williams, "Trinity and Ontology," in *On Christian Theology*, 158.

[82] MacKinnon, "The Relation of the Doctrines," 154.

[83] Williams, "Trinity and Ontology," in *On Christian Theology*, 148-66.

[84] The language of "external" and "internal" relations is apparently drawn upon the debates between F.H. Bradley, Bertrand Russell, and G.E. Moore, a debate that was especially important for MacKinnon as regards the question of "realism." Williams spends several pages at the beginning of "Trinity and Ontology" engaging in a cogent summary of the importance of this debate for MacKinnon in general, showing how "external" relations, on Moore's and MacKinnon's view, gives greater sway to contingency than the Bradleyean option.

[85] Williams, "Trinity and Ontology," 158-59.

For Williams then, the Trinitarian difference of Father and Son is the ontological basis for the difference of the material world of creation. His reception of MacKinnon's "analogy of limits" is a teasing out of this idea, and one may see this as a restatement of the doctrine of trinitarian appropriations: the Father and Son cannot be "absorbed" into one another, since this would undermine the difference between the persons of the Trinity; these relations constitute a kind of otherness that is inherent in any concept of love that maintains the objectivity of the beloved. And it is these distinguishing terms of trinitarian relation that are the ground of creaturely finitude—and the potential tragedy and risk it involves. Like in the essay on John of the Cross, discussed above, here it is through Jesus's approach towards the extremity of death that he encounters the non-objectifying otherness of God. On the cross, God is present *in* and *to* Jesus in the limit and sheer externality of mortal terror and dereliction.[86] But this "distance" or "absence" is already included in the relatedness of Trihypostatic Being, and it is this movement that we are taken up into in our experiences of dereliction through the Spirit. Moreover, for Williams it is precisely through living within certain kinds of tragic limits that new language might be born, ways of speaking and perceiving that are *truthful*, and which may stimulate transformative action, alerting us to what is made possible in concrete ways through the contingencies of history.[87] In this light, the narrative of Jesus opens us to transformative possibilities through his own kenotic action, suggesting that "[the] self-abnegation of Jesus in its specific form of active and transfiguring acceptance of the world's limit is not at all a mere paradigm for conscienceless obedience or resignation; it is what puts to us the question of how God can be if this is how he is historically."[88]

All of this chimes strongly with Williams's own reception of Balthasar.[89] For Balthasar, trinitarian distinctions are, once again, somewhat mythically conceptualised under the category of "self-alienation that makes possible the freedom and love of an other that is at the same time itself *in* otherness."[90] Invoking a metaphysics of Holy Saturday, this Trinitarian distinction is manifest in the "extremity of the relation between God and the God-forsaken Jesus" and is our entrance into the knowledge of the triune life. The Trinity for Balthasar is that life which "sustains itself as unqualified unity across the greatest completeness or alienation that can be imagined, thereby appearing as "unqualified gift" or "bestowal."[91] "Alienation" and "bestowal" are here coeval and coterminous. The Trinitarian distinction is imagined within an ontological extremity, for the "gulf between Father and crucified Son, between Father in heaven and Son in hell, now appears as the immeasurable measure

[86] Cf. "God is revealed in the death of Jesus, revealed in his cry of dereliction, revealed in Gethsemane, all this is straining language to the breaking point; because what we are affirming is that God is revealed by his *absence*, revealed in the condition of 'Godlessness'… a world of chaos, anguish and senselessness." Rowan Williams, "'Person' and 'Personality' in Christology," *The Downside Review* 94 (1976): 259.

[87] Williams, "Trinity and Ontology," 163-64.

[88] Ibid., 158.

[89] However, it should be said, with less of the Kantian register prevalent in MacKinnon's reading of Balthasar; see Donald MacKinnon, "Some Reflections on Hans Urs Von Balthasar's Christology with Special Reference to Theodramatik II/2 and III," in *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty: A Donald MacKinnon Reader*, ed. John McDowell (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 281-88.

[90] Williams, "Balthasar and Difference," in *Wrestling with Angels*, 81.

[91] Ibid., 81.

of the way divine love 'leaves' itself, travels infinitely from itself (from self-possession, self-presence)."[92] In the divine life "there can be no identity prior to differentiation," that is, no identity without the implication of difference and relations, no self-possession without self-bestowal.[93]

The terminology of *bestowal* and *alienation* is comparable to the analogy of limits and its implication of "externality," "boundary," or "distance."[94] The divine traversal of "extremity" and "alienation" through the movement of bestowal, self-differentiation and unification, across the divide of the historical cross of Jesus and the abyss of Godforsakenness, is already accounted for within the triune relations. And it is this trinitarian metaphysic which grounds for Balthasar the analogy of being via the *analogia crucis*. This is manifest in the way that for him the *analogia entis* speaks to "the active presence of the divine liberty, love and beauty precisely within the various and finite material/temporal reality."[95] For Balthasar, the active presence of divinity is not primarily discovered at "points in the created order where finitude and creatureliness appear to thin out or open up to mysterious infinity, but in creation being itself—which includes, paradigmatically, creation being itself in unfinishedness, time-taking, pain and death. The crucified Jesus is, in this context, the ground and manifestation of what analogy means."[96] The analogy of the cross (*analogia crucis*) reveals the analogy of being (*analogia entis*).

For Williams, Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday as divine "self-othering" lays the foundation for God's creative activity in relation to the world,[97] and his overcoming of the distance experienced between God and God in the cross of Christ through the Spirit ("*Holy Saturday leads us to the very beginning of creation*").[98] Williams here explicitly mentions Balthasar's references to Bulgakov's idea of eternal kenosis (or "divine godlessness").[99] In this eternal, theodramatic movement between the persons "the identity of God appears as a free and loving self-differentiating, a totality of giving so radical that God's giving energy generates *that which it is not* and lives wholly and unreservedly *in* that which it is not."[100] As such, reality is revealed to be fundamentally kenotic and ekstatic.[101] It is within this context of Balthasar's theology of divine self-differentiation, Holy Saturday, and analogy, that Williams ventures to say that "what is taken up" in "the saving act of Christ is real historical dereliction, unconsoled and unmeaningful failure or suffering," that "the necessary absence of *any resolution within time* [italics mine] of tensions and sufferings is involved in the identity-in-difference that is between God and creation."[102] Here Williams's reference to non-closure and incalculable suffering is understood within the context of

[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Cf. "The eternal difference in Trinitarian life between Father and Son is what makes possible the identification of the Son with even the most radical state of 'otherness' from God or separation from God." Williams, "The Soul in Paraphrase: Augustine as Interpreter of the Psalms," in *On Augustine*, 28.
[95] Williams, "Balthasar and Difference," 80.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Williams, "Balthasar and the Trinity," 37-50.
[98] Ibid., 42.
[99] Ibid., 38.
[100] Ibid., 39.
[101] Ibid., 41.
[102] Ibid., 43.

creaturely finitude, and is placed within the Christologically circumscribed context of analogy, as found in Balthasar's work. For Balthasar, the *analogia trinitatis* is opened by the *analogia crucis*.

However, as already hinted at, behind Balthasar and MacKinnon there is the seminal influence of Sergii Bulgakov.[103] In a series of lectures on Eastern Orthodox pneumatology, Williams summarises Bulgakov's kenotic account of the Trinity: "The Father gives all that he has and is to the Son, gives over everything to the Son. When the Son comes forth in the Father's begetting, nothing is held back."[104] In line with the theme of the original lectures, this trinitarian picture opens to a particular rendering of Spirit, inflected by this general kenotic picture. Using somewhat starker language, he writes that "The Spirit is that divine agent pointing to the life of mutual giving as the life of God. The Spirit makes the mutual giving of Father and Son a giving *out*, not simply a giving to and an exchange … *the potential tragedy of mutual annihilation* [italics mine] is overcome in the joy of the Spirit."[105] The language of "excess" echoed here in the transcendence of the dyad of Father and Son points towards the outward movement of the Spirit, one that negates any idea of complete emptying of the one into the other. Bulgakov risks a provocative phrase by describing this mutual self-emptying as "self-devastation,"[106] but he does not end there. Bulgakov ameliorates annihilation through the agency of the Spirit, by arguing, as Williams says, that "the tragedy and tension of the emptying out of the Father and Son into each other" is "revealed as life, glory and saving presence."[107] However, this not to be read as "strictly descriptive of the inner life of God," for if it was it would imply "importing into God the stories of tension and resolution that are typical of relations between finite persons in history." For Williams and Bulgakov, "thinking of God's eternal Trinitarian love, we must not take as our basic model any kind of unqualified outpouring into the Other that ends in cancelling out distinction," but rather "the self-emptying of the love of Father and Son for each other always 'overflows' into another agency of personal mode of active love."[108] This statement makes clear that Bulgakov, by using the language of tension and tragedy, is *not* concerned with "the domestic dramas of divine persons,"[109] even as he does say that Bulgakov's trinitarian metaphysic approaches a kind of "potent mythology."[110] As he makes clear in a later essay on Bulgakov, the hypostatic life of the Trinity is "eternally and irreducibly a life of dispossession or self-displacement for the sake of another,"[111] but this means for Bulgakov that the persons have no "reality" in themselves apart from "their unrestricted gift of life to each other," and that while this kenotic reality of "self-sacrifice" would appear to creatures as "a tragic self-destruction," it appears within the divine life as "the plenitude of productive love and bliss."[112]

[103] Rowan Williams, *A Margin of Silence: The Holy Spirit in Russian Orthodox Theology* (Québec: Éditions dus Lys Vert, 2008).
[104] Ibid., 22.
[105] Ibid., 23.
[106] Ibid., 22.
[107] Ibid., 24.
[108] Ibid., 23.
[109] Ibid., 24.
[110] Ibid., 23.
[111] Williams, "Sergii Bulgakov's Christology and Beyond," 33.
[112] Ibid., 36.

So it is this reception of Bulgakov, Balthasar, and MacKinnon which energises Williams's trinitarian inflection of sacrifice and dispossession. For Williams, trinitarian self-displacement, as manifest incarnationally, is not "an emptying of God without remainder into the otherness of history or contingency"—a theological appropriation of Hegel which Williams ultimately rejects. Instead, "what is enacted in history *is* the divine life," and he sees this divine enactment in history as revealed in a kenotic movement of the deity "living in its other, realising its 'interest' in its other," as a "divine displacement in one sense or another."[113] It suggests a trinitarian picture, and a distinctive vision of political theology under the conditions of history; this dialectical awareness of dispossession and of recognising one's interests non-identically in another is indeed read by Williams within the *labour* of the negative, within the brokenness of fallen creation, with all its tragic overtures. But this is not the whole story: labouring can also be read as *creative* and *generative* negativity—here in a "Hegelian" mode rather than a "Kantian" mode of transcendental limits given *a priori*. Dispossession, here following Hegel via Gillian Rose, occurs in a dialectical negativity that oscillates productively between the actual and the real.[114] By ceding space for the other to exist and emerge, refusing the imposition my own will-to-power—a kind of Hobbesian race to the bottom—I may come to recognise that *my* good is bound up with the good of the other, since tragic conflict is not some kind of irremediable kink in the system of creaturely relations. Human conflict and one-sidedness can be negotiated, and even transcended.[115] For Williams, however, the decentring of "isolated" or purported "self-sufficient" subjects is not merely a gesture of conciliatory *Realpolitik*, but is engendered by a dispossessive metaphysics in which in the abyss of distance and dereliction of the cross is conditioned by the creative and resurrectionary gift of the Father through the Spirit.

For Williams, a theology of the cross needs a metaphysics, a vision that accounts for *why* "actuality" is *difficult*. Here we need to reflect upon why a kenotic posture is a fundamentally *truthful* perception of reality, and for that we need a metaphysical picture in which such a posture makes sense. Speculations on *ontology*, however fallible and limited, are required.[116] In this vein, even as the analogy of being should be read through the analogy of the Trinity, both receive elucidation through the analogy of the cross, the resurrection of the crucified Christ. The event of the cross hereby inflects our ontological investigations. In the Apocalypse, it is the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world who opens the book of history (Revelation 5:1-14; 13:8), and it is the crucified Jesus who is the revelation of the eternal kenosis of the Son. The holocaust and dereliction of the cross both communicate something

[113] Williams, "Between Politics and Metaphysics," in *Wrestling with Angels*, 72-73.

[114] Gillian Rose's Hegelian philosophy can be read as being oriented towards a primacy of the *speculative* rather than *dialectic*, the former being concerned with the positivity of reason while the latter with its negativity. It is for this reason also that she reads Hegel primarily as a philosophy of "the comic" rather than "the tragic." This however does not cancel the continuing "brokenness" between the real and the actual, between law and ethics, especially as these are mediated politically and theologically in the here and now; cf. Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 63-76. Williams's reception of this may be seen in "The Sadness of the King."

[115] Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 56-81.

[116] Williams, "Between Politics and Metaphysics," 72-73.

of the divine nature and the world: an eternal self-giving manifested under the conditions of fallenness, the face of love under the regime of sin and death. This is not a legitimation of all suffering and deprivation—a theodicy Williams does not accept. Tragic suffering is not justified but born and transformed salvifically. But this does not eliminate its continuing *difficulty*. In the words of Cora Diamond, we might understand such difficulty as that "apparent resistance by reality to one's ordinary modes of life, including one's ordinary modes of thinking."[117] Ontological difficulty is an acknowledgement that we undergo, engage, and negotiate these "externalities," the contingencies and impingements of lived engagement. The alienating and distancing energies of the world can be both transformative and terrifying. Not even the Son of God safely navigated its terrain. However, the victimisation of Christ is transformed through resurrection, so that even though the wounds of the risen Christ are indeed not obliterated (John 20:24-29), they are—as in the words of the Roman Mass—"bloodless."

This is why his reception of MacKinnon, Balthasar, and Bulgakov are important for Williams: one needs to give an account for why kenosis and dispossession are *truthful*, and why our conformation implies a participation in the real, in the eternal generation and kenosis of the Son. It gestures towards those ontologically prior conditions that elucidate the labour of negativity, that is, our continuing negotiation with the difficulty of the world in all its externality and resistance. Nonetheless, our experience of limits and resistance should not imply a moral fatalism or the refusal of thought—as in a simplistic evocation of divine mysteriousness. Our continuing "exposure" to an "outside" or "limit" can be understood as the cultivation of meaning, of delimitation and ordering, but it might also constitute its rupture.[118] The "externality" of the Son in relation to the Father is the reason for the "externality" of the world, even as this "externality" may take on forms of tragic loss. The tragic is not a transcendental limit on action and thought, though it is one way that the externality of the world *may* impact such activity.[119] For Williams, dispossession and negativity are metaphysically conditioned by the intratrinitarian plenitude of *sacrifice* and *gift*. The Trinity is an eternal act of self-dispossession and self-giving in which there is no self-identity apart from a self-emptying into the other. The Father knows Himself only as the One who gives Himself to the Son in the Spirit as the Unbegotten Source of the Son and the Spirit, and the Son only knows Himself in His sacrificial self-displacement to the Father as Word and Image in the Spirit, and the Spirit only has self-knowledge as the Gift and Love of both the Father and the Son—the eternal life that is the Immanent Trinity. Here the *analogia trinitatis*, that analogy which gives context to the *analogia entis* and elucidates its profoundest mystery, gives the ground or reason for the *analogia crucis*—the cross of Christ but also those crosses which we ourselves are to carry (Matthew 16:24-26).

[117] Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," in *Philosophy and Animal Life* by Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Ian Hacking and Cary Wolfe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 58.

[118] Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, trans. François Raffoul and Gregory Recco (New Jersey: Humanity Books, 1997).

[119] It is here that Williams seems to differ from MacKinnon, who—as John Milbank has argued—tended to read limits and historicity in a "semi-Kantian" fashion. Cf. John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 24.

In the following section, building upon the previous sections, I will turn explicitly to how Williams's trinitarian ontology relates to his mature ruminations on the tragic, and its possible implications for Christian spirituality.

IV

Williams's trinitarian metaphysics of distance and dispossession elucidates his account of the tragic.[120] For Williams, the tragic always implies, firstly, some *narrative* context that is situated and communicated within its continual unfolding. Tragedy always has a specific context in which it makes *cultural* sense. Moreover, we can never understand suffering, actual or dramatically represented, apart from the processes of historical meaning-making in which they are found. The fact that stories may be told, re-told, so that narrative may be continued and expanded, pushes against a picture that would situate tragedy within a closed circle of fatalism. That we tell tragic stories, that their meaning is continually expanded through the movements of time and language points against an *a priori* assumption of pessimism which says that tragedy necessarily entails catastrophic endings. It shows that meaning continues to be generated through continued representation. This connects to the second point: tragedy implies *irony*, in which our presuppositions are undermined or transformed through the development of the story. This resists a metaphysical pessimism since "the mere fact of narration, the *following* on from the record of horror and failure" might change the meaning of the unfolding circumstance.[121] Cultural narration produces meaning-making while irony points to the way that the assumed meanings we ascribe may be overturned through narrative and historical development. There is something *truthful* which may be said about reality, but this truth may be elusive and *difficult*, that is, without temporal closure and continually being negotiated.

Trinitarian ontology says something analogous, though always framed by the *semper maior*. Trinitarian identity only exists within difference, deflection, and the displacement of the trinitarian persons. Because Trihypostatic Being "corresponds to or coincides with itself in non-identical fashion" then finite being and becoming, in its imaging of the Trinity, can also be read as communication, non-identical repetition, and mediation.[122] If we can say that created being images, analogically and non-identically, Trinitarian reality then it is not surprising that finite being also reflects this interpenetration of identity and differentiation, without any return to an unmoving point of orientation. There is selfhood, but only in relational exposure to its "outside"; there is self-possession, but only in self-giving. This picture grounds for Williams a cultural ontology of meaning formation, of language, of representation. One of the central aspects of the tragic for Williams is that tragedy is not a reportage of sheer contingency: "we are not simply passive in the face of terror and suffering, because we can *imagine* it, narrate it, make pictures of it that make it an agenda for others and for ourselves."[123] The tragic is only grasped within a broader context of meaning and representation in which narratives and events may be grasped *as* tragic.

[120] For the following, see Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 132.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Williams, "The Embodied Logos," 89.
[123] Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 1-2.

But since we cannot transcend our historical conditioning, tragic narration will always continue to be open to further narrations and maybe *different* narrations—without thereby denying the undeniable loss or suffering experienced. The estrangements of time may transform the valence of tragic knowledge. Literature and experience both suggest, as seen in how tragic narratives are revised and expanded through their reception,[124] that the phenomenon of the tragic may be transformed through history. There are no "brute facts" apart from a context in which they may be specified, since matter and *mattering*, fact and value, cannot be prised apart for Williams.[125] That which exists cannot be identified without relational determination, and there is no "unknowable interiority"[126] of things apart from their continuing exposure to the other *within* and *without*—exemplified in the self-estrangement and irony of tragic representations.[127] Indeed, one motif of tragic literature is what is unleashed through a resistance to certain kinds of self-knowledge and self-othering.[128] One's self-identity may be ruptured or destabilised by an encounter with *the self as another* (e.g., Oedipus, Othello), and tragic circumstances may unfurl through the failure to assimilate or bear such knowing.[129] Here our relational bonds, between self, other and world, can make us *and* break us.

Now we should not ascribe tragic irony to the intratrinitarian relations, but nonetheless it seems dogmatically feasible to say, as we have seen earlier, that the Trinitarian distinctions and relations are the ontological ground of creaturely difference and temporality. This would include the experiences of self-estrangement and displacement in time, as befits Williams's Augustinian approach (the *distentio animi*),[130] and its ontological subset of historical and tragic irony. Trihypostatic Being grounds truth and identity because ultimately it is predicated on the trinitarian correspondence of God to God through God. However, negativity, estrangement, and temporal irony may also find an analogical, *creaturely* correspondence to trinitarian difference, displacement, and "externality." This is visible in the phenomenon of temporal *estrangement*, that self-othering through time, which is characteristic of historical being, a lived fragmentation which Christ himself bears and heals.[131] Overall, for Williams the grounding of created finitude in the trinitarian identity-

[124] Ibid., 4-28.

[125] Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). Also see Catherine Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth: A New Religious Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 84-112.

[126] Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 31.

[127] "There is, so to speak, a unique 'locus' within the net of shifting relations which constitutes itself an identity precisely in the multiplicity of 'othernesses' which act in or through or across it. What there is not is a solid mysterious singleness on to which a variety of extras are bolted. The mysteriousness or inexpressibility of the subject is not a hinterland of self-relation." Rowan Williams, "Commentary to Antoine Arjakovsky, 'Glorification of the Name and Grammar of Wisdom' (Sergii Bulgakov and Jean-Marc Ferry)," in *Encounter Between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World Through the Word*, ed. Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 40.

[128] Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 30-55.

[129] Cf. Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[130] Cf. Williams, "Time and Self-Awareness in the Confessions."

[131] See Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 111-13; cf. Donald MacKinnon, "Some Notes on the Irreversibility of Time," in *Explorations in Theology 5* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 90-98.

in-plurality means that truth and meaning are always interlaced with difference, displacement, and temporalization. On the one hand, *identity* guarantees truthfulness and realism, and undermines a hyper-ironic posture that leads to the dissolution and hyper-relativization of any meaning—as found for instance in the postmodern sublime or any nihilism for that matter.[132] On the other hand, trinitarian *difference* or "externality" grounds historicity, finitude, and mediation: we have no final or immediate grasp of truth, for any pulsion towards the real remains open to the pressure of the negative. This chastens any totalising system or theodicy which may constitute "an attempt to forget it as suffering," and thus form "a quest for untruthfulness."[133] And it is our conscious appropriation and participation in this reality through Word and Spirit that sustains for Williams "the critical and dialectical aspect" of divine revelation.[134] The experience of negativity, temporalization and dialectic, however, also gives sway to the generative and emergent: Williams sees truth and the real as a form of poetic *addition* rather than a simple correspondence of thinking mind to unmeaning matter.[135] Things are *more than they are* and *give more than they have*, and its precisely in the self-displacement and dispossession of fixed, stable identities that new things and relations may emerge, since "truthfulness unfolds … and makes possible different levels of appropriating or sharing in the activity that is the world,"[136] since "the life of reality is what unfolds in time, generating more and more symbolic structures, not a timeless and relation-free definition."[137] Now contingency implies that we cannot guarantee that what is generated is always to our benefit—that is the tragic risk—but what can be said for the Christian is that such tragic limits are always already born by the incarnational embrace of the contingent, so that finitude itself may be opened to the transformational action of Spirit as creation itself is incorporated into the Son in his sacrificial offering to the Father.

Trinitarian ontology is always under the sign of the cross. It is always already supplemented and mediated through Christology, the *analogia trinitatis* through the *analogia crucis*. On this point, Hemmerle himself asks whether Trinitarian ontology constitutes a form of spiritual evasion, if it simply avoids "that which is not subsumed, guilt, loneliness, mourning over finitude, the failure to reach one's goal," and he wonders if all of this is merely "negated or relativized into a merely contrastive transitional moment in the system." However, Hemmerle pushes back against this, arguing in fact that "the deepest point of a Trinitarian ontology" is the kenosis of the

[132] By the "postmodern sublime," I am referring to a specific configuration of "transcendence" that occurs in the wake of the sundering of the beautiful and the sublime—chiefly found in the Third Critique of Kant. The prioritization of formlessness over form, specifically within postmodern receptions of Kant, has led to a certain parody of negative theology in which—unlike Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas—there is little hope of positive recuperation through apophasis but rather the continual suspension of form and meaning as *itself* the truth of the Real (here with an intentional Lacanian register). For this, see Graham Ward, "Transcendence and Representation" and John Milbank, "Sublimity: The Modern Transcendent," in *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology Approach the Beyond*, ed. Regina Schwartz (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 127-47; 211-34 respectively.

[133] Williams, "Trinity and Ontology," 155.

[134] Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," in *On Christian Theology*, 146.

[135] Williams, *The Edge of Words*, cf. Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*.

[136] Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2005), 137.

[137] Ibid., 139-40.

Son in which "all finitudes and contradictions are taken on by the event of divine self-giving" so that in "the cry of 'why?' on the Cross and the silence of Sheol, into which the Son descends, everything is integrated and yet nothing is appropriated." This for him is the ground of a Christian hope that is "the opposite of ideology, oppression, and self-assured exploitation."[138] It is in the eternal and temporal kenosis of the Son that tragedy finds its metaphysical context. It is against this ontological backdrop, one could say, that human suffering finds its placement within the crucified *Logos*. Suffering and loss are of course a privation of being, but it is only against the horizon of the plenitude of Being that loss *as* loss can find its context.[139]

This ultimate ground and logos, for the Christian, is the trinitarian God revealed in the crucified and risen Jesus: as the Lutheran dictum has it, *crux probat omnia*.[140] It is through what Williams elsewhere calls the "anti-representation" of the cross, that is, the incarnate Son's adoption of human frailty and fragmentation, that "earthly representation" may be opened to the eternal, so that within "the recognition of distance" there is "also buried the apprehension of gift or revelation."[141] Once again, we have a more positive account of limitation, distance or boundary as opening towards the "distance" implied by "gift," and not sheer negativity or nihilistic irony. Christological universality and particularity gives human suffering, death, and loss a finalized dignity, a transcendent *form* after which our privation may be *con-formed*. There is no tragedy or tragic suffering without registering transcendent valuation and quality. This is roughly what MacKinnon meant when he spoke of "the transcendence of the tragic."[142] He was addressing the way that tragedy requires a metaphysical environment in order to be registered *as* tragedy. One needs something like a metaphysics to explain why tragedy *is* tragic, why reality is *difficult*. For if nihilism or reductive materialism are assumed, then for him there can be no true tragedies, since there is no backdrop in which such loss could be judged as finally meaningful. But contrariwise, to take the negativity of tragedy seriously also means that every attempt to construct a comprehensive picture of the meaning of suffering may be an attempt to smooth over its rougher edges. For MacKinnon, and also for Williams it would seem, both movements are important to sustain.[143]

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[138] Hemmerle, *Theses towards a Trinitarian ontology*, 53-54. Also see "Trinity and Ontology," 160-63.

[139] Walter Stein writes, in a book that is influential on Williams, that "Tragic awareness is the awareness of absolute violation of being: a confrontation with infinite meanings. This is the defining distinction between 'mere suffering' and tragic awareness. The witness of the tragic tradition—as of any authentic direct response of tragic exposure—is basically just this: that man is the locus of absolute violations of being. Tragedy occurs where we enter the timeless significance of such violations." Walter Stein, *Criticism as Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 224. Also cf. "The essential 'lack of being' or 'negativity' in suffering must, therefore, not be understood merely as a necessary moment of the immanent dialectics or as an inner-worldly coincidence. Because every *privativum* points to the fullness of being, the mightiness of reality that prevails as the essential 'negativity' in the scandalous suffering of innocent children is the reference to the same origin of being that also shines out through the phenomenon of beauty and makes all being beautiful. The scandalous suffering disrupting the beauty of being does not lead away from metaphysics, but back to it again. The question is what kind of metaphysics could account for this interweaving of the mystery of suffering with the mystery of being as love." Eduard Fiedler, *Kinder der Trinität: Eine trinitarische Ontologie der Schönheit in Anlehnung an die Deutschsprachige trinitarische Ontologie des 20. Jahrhunderts* (PhD diss., University of Regensburg and Masaryk University, 2021), 269.

[140] Cf. Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross*, revised edition (London: Darton, Longman and Todd,1990), 181.

[141] Williams, "Language, Reality and Desire," 49-50.

[142] Donald MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 129.

[143] Cf. Delport, *On Tragedy and Transcendence*, 71.

The topics of kenosis, limit, and dispossession, of the relation between self-reception and self-bestowal, also connects to the life of Christian faith and discipleship, so that spiritual and prayerful discipline sustains human freedom and transformation. For a robustly trinitarian vision of Christian spirituality must also include the way that the Christological *logos* may be embodied in our lives as a transformational *tropos*, adopting here the language of Maximus the Confessor.[144] That is, it must say something about the work of the Spirit in our lives and how the image of Christ and Trinity may become exemplified therein. In a suggestive essay on pneumatology, Williams has said that we should move away from linear or sequential accounts in which the agency of the Spirit is conceived under a kind of "bridge-concept" that mediates the gap between God and the world.[145] There is no metaphysical "gap" between God and the world that needs a mediating concept, as if God somehow must be brought into relation with the world.[146] Rather, the Spirit's work within the world can be understood as that agency which takes us up into "the mutuality of Father and Son," by "re-creating, *translating* it, in the medium of human existence."[147] The work of the Spirit is about being taken up into this trinitarian *ekstasis* of Father and Son; and if one may understand the life of Trinity as "an unending openness to the inexhaustible other," then one may also see the spiritual life in light of this transcendental difference insofar as it is "'stretched out' in the conditions of our temporal existence," implying something like a "constant growing towards the imageless depths of God's otherness."[148] Our knowledge of the triune God, by being united with the Son in the dereliction of the cross, is *not* primarily "the construction of a conceptual framework but the 'aptness' of a life that fits with the constraining and defining reality of God's being—a knowing that is first the relation of self-forgetfulness in the face of the divine, the carrying of the cross, and the filial prayer of *Abba*."[149] This prayer is the prayer of adoption (Galatians 4:6), but it is also the prayer of Gethsemane (Mark 14:36), the prayer of those who long for redemption within a world subjected to futility (Romans 8:15-17).

Our participation and incorporation in the Spirit is thereby an adoption into the kenosis of the divine Son and the mystery of the Triduum, as this corresponds to Trinitarian Being *in se*: "the Spirit is the Spirit of kenosis and we cannot expect our participation in Christ's kenosis to be painless, so long as we live in history."[150] However, since the Trinity is the very ground of creaturely existence, then this tells us "why the abandoning of possession or control as an ideal is the fundamentally *truthful* response to the world we inhabit."[151] It is truthful because it manifests God's own self-correspondence to God within the life of Trinity. It is through the mysteries

[144] See Williams's essays "Theologizing the Life of the Spirit" and "Nature, Passion and Desire: The Excessiveness of Being," in his collection *Looking East in Winter*.

[145] Williams, "Word and Spirit," in *On Christian Theology*, 107-27.

[146] Ibid., 123: "[T]he work of the Spirit, like the Son's work, is bound up precisely with the *loss* of mediatorial concepts designed to explain how the transcendent God (who is *elsewhere*) can be communicated *here*. The pivotal image of Jesus as Son radically changes the simple schema of God-and-the-world."

[147] Williams, "Word and Spirit," 120.

[148] Williams, "Theologizing the Life of the Spirit," 42.

[149] Williams, "The Embodied Logos," 91.

[150] Rowan Williams, "The Spirit of the Age to Come," *Sobornost: The Journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius* 6, no. 9 (1974): 623.

[151] Williams, "Theologizing the Life of the Spirit," 44.

of Christian rites that we are brought deeper into this trinitarian reality and into a "kenotic communion"[152] with one another through the broken and Eucharistic body of Christ.[153] It is through baptism, the spiritual discipline of prayer, the sacrament of the Eucharist, as well as the practice of psalmody, intercession, and lamentation, amongst others, that we are gradually united with the *tropos* of Christ's "fractured and suffering life, culminating on the cross."[154] These words, the words of scripture, prayer, and liturgy, through their continued performance, become Christ's own words to the Father, and thus are taken up and included in this eternal mutuality. For by being incorporated into the *totus Christus*, as Williams says in one of his essays on Augustine, that which "we do not and cannot know about our past, present and future is given over to God, who will draw out of us cries and aspirations that more and more clearly give voice to what is hidden in us."[155] Our lives are hereby storied by Christ's own imaging of dispossession, becoming a "reproduction of Christ's acceptance of the fallen and struggling condition," so that in this "the narrated human life of the believer becomes a sign of God."[156]

V

In summary then: for Williams, the eternal differentiation of Father, Son, and Spirit is revealed in the Christ-event. Since the death of the Son manifests *in illo tempore* the act of eternal self-giving and sacrificial love within Trihypostatic Being, then it is this eternal and temporal kenosis of the Son, this experience of historical "distance" from the Father, that contextualises every human death, loss, and tragedy within the unity of the Triduum. The analogy of being (*analogia entis*), consummated in the Holy Trinity (*analogia trinitatis*), is mediated by the analogy of the cross (*analogia crucis*). For Williams, it appears that tragedy does not occur without a narrative and metaphysical context, and it is within the sacrificial *logos* and *tropos* of Christ that the tragic has its unfolding meaning in time. Without a transcendental horizon in which human suffering and loss is understood and communicated, the persistence and negativity of the tragic is dissolved, reduced to the merely unfortunate and sad, but not devastating. The priority of divine beatitude is what allows us to register tragic loss as a loss of a specifically stringent kind, giving reason why tragic knowledge is both *truthful* and *difficult*. This metaphysical conceit guards against a hyper-ironic posture

[152] Williams, "The Spirit of the Age to Come," 623-25.

[153] "God acts, offers, gives, in order to bring creation into fellowship with him; and, because that fellowship is so strange to fearful, self-enclosed, human beings, it requires a uniquely creative gift—a gift which involves God's manifesting himself without power of threat. He 'distances' himself from the stability of the divine life in order to share the vulnerability and darkness of mortal men and women. By the 'gift' of his presence … he establishes communion; but this can only be clearly shown in conditions of final rejection and dereliction. The gift is consummated in the cross." He goes on further to say that "If we are to be fully a gift to the Father, given by ourselves yet also by and through the crucified, by our association with that prior gift, we must bear the cost—which is the loss of all we do and all we possess to defend ourselves against God and others and death … against sharing the real vulnerability of the finite world, against the real need and poverty of ourselves and our brothers and sisters. The cost is a loss of images and fantasies, of clear, tight frontiers to the self. If we can even begin to give in this way, it is only because of the depth of the assurance implied in the gift given us in Calvary." Rowan Williams, *Eucharistic Sacrifice: The Roots of a Metaphor*, Grove Liturgical Study 31 (Bramcote, Notts: Grove, 1982), 28-29.

[154] Williams, "The Soul in Paraphrase," 34.

[155] Ibid., 34-35.

[156] Ibid., 37.

of unending historical relativization and deferral that threatens any grounding of transcendent value essential for the moral weight of tragedy. However, the eternal dynamism, plenitude, non-closure and non-identical repetition of Trinitarian Being also "negates" any unmediated access to the real, any static picture or systematic theodicy, which would deny the labour of the negative, as if we could position ourselves *outside* of history. This also requires an account of the agency of the Spirit as well as our deepening participation in the life of the triune God. Primarily, for the Christian, the discernment of *logos* within suffering and loss is referred to the spiritual regime of prayer and liturgy whereby we are joined to the eternal prayer of Jesus—including his prayer from Gethsemane and the Cross. It is also through the sacrifice of Eucharist that our incorporation into the suffering body of Christ is continually re-performed and re-actualised in our lives, and we are thereby trained to see the divine presence under the signs of the ordinary and apparently Godforsaken world, including the broken and mutilated corpus of the Son of God.[157]

As a conclusion to the essay, Gerard Manley Hopkins's magnificent poem *The Wreck of the Deutschland* resonates with several themes covered here. It was composed in the wake of the deaths of several Franciscan nuns at sea, and gives flourish to the correlation of Trinitarian ontology and the tragic I have been attempting to delineate here. Infusing his poetic narrative with a Catholic imaginary, Hopkins attempts to read the tale of the shipwreck through the lens of Trinitarian theology: here, Hopkins does not pull back from sensing God's "three-numberéd form" in the "dense and the driven Passion," signified and mediated for him in the "cipher of suffering Christ," violently marked by human beings, and staring down from the cross with a spiritual vertigo into the deathly abyss, in which Christ himself becomes "Hard down with a horror of height." God is not left unscathed, as he

> scores it in scarlet himself on his own bespoken,
> Before-time-taken, dearest prizèd and priced—
> Stigma, signal, cinquefoil token
> For lettering of the lamb's fleece, ruddying of the rose-flake.

Hopkins's poetic rephrasing of the Apocalypse of John speaks to a Trinitarian ontology of the cross—that "Lovescape crucified" who "Heaven and earth are word of, and worded by." All of this has existential freight for the believer: death by drowning is no mere theoretical matter. Neither is Christ's terror. Indeed, "the faithful waiver." But even here Hopkins desires to see and feel God's finger, to devise a "happy memory" out of the tragedy. Through a crucible of trinitarian imagery, Hopkins pictures believers as orientating themselves to the crucified and risen One, to a "crimson-cresseted east," as "dovewinged" hearts are carried to the Eucharistic Host of the "stressed" and "instressed" mystery, so that those awakened desirously might be drawn to and perceive

[157] There are similarities in this picture to the one given by Francesca A. Murphy; see "God Making for Tragedy," *Church Life Journal: A Journal of the McGrath Institute for Church Life* (May 03, 2022): https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/god-making-for-tragedy/.

in a glass darkly the luminous Three-in-One: "Stanching, quenching ocean of a motionable mind; / Ground of being, and granite of it."[158]

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

[158] "The Wreck of the Deutschland," in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, fourth edition, edited by W.H. Gardner and N.H MacKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 51-63. For theological commentary on this, see Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 198-205.