

HOMO POETA: ROWAN WILLIAMS AND POETIC ANTHROPOLOGY

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Abstract

Rowan Williams's trinitarian ontology rests on the affirmation of *eros* within God and the 'irreducible otherness' of the divine persons to one another. The divine persons are accordingly conceived in *ek-static* terms as 'giving more than they are'. In the generation of the Son and the spiration of the Spirit we discern the 'timeless making other that is intrinsic to God's being'. It is this poetics from above that is the 'fountainhead' of finite human creativity on Williams's view, and more specifically, the eternal filial reality of the Son as the Art, Image or Sign of the Father. Conversely, his poetics from below begins with a phenomenology of artistic labour and linguistic practice that is acutely alert to the material and temporalized conditions of human making. In this article, I elaborate and defend the coordination and mutual illumination provided by his poetics from above and from below which affects a significant reworking of how we imagine the relation between the finite and the infinite. What emerges from this re-working, I will argue, is a profound, ecstatic and 'personalist' view of the material and temporal human creature becoming 'hypostatic' via a *filial* mode of creativity.

Introduction

Rowan Williams has consistently underlined the significance of theological anthropology for twenty-first century theology.¹ In this article, the focal lens is on the significance of *poesis*—that is, human making and creativity, in the broadest sense—to his theological anthropology.² Close to the nerve centre of Williams's thought are questions about how the various forms of *poesis*, whether our 'habits of speech'³ or strategies of 'artistic

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¹ Rowan Williams, 'Closing Address' delivered at an international conference entitled 'Rowan Williams: A Cambridge Celebration' in the University of Cambridge, September 2023. Accessed 25 Oct, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wg_G-UWZNu8.

² The OED defines 'poesis' broadly as '[t]he process of making; production, creation; creativity, culture'. See 'Poesis', *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023). <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/146519#eid29352557>. This is in accord with Williams's claim about the unity of 'the poetic [and] by implication the artistic in general'. See Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Morehouse, 2005), 23. I take this proposed unity to dissolve the ancient characterisation of art as merely rule-following skill without creativity, invention or freedom. See 'Creativity' in Władysław Tatkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas: An Essay in Aesthetics*, (Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers, 2013).

³ Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 1.

labour',⁴ connect with the divine life of the Trinity. It will be the claim and argument of this article that Williams proposes a fertile linkage between the doctrine of the Trinity and the 'doctrine of finite creativity',⁵ which is faithful to the apophatic insights of Eastern and Western trinitarianism and attuned to the process and limits of 'artistic labour' as experienced and recounted by actual artists. Most significantly, I will argue that the intuitive comparison between the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of finite creativity is apt to be distorting of the meaning of the human as artist (*homo poeta*) without a trinitarian frame.⁶ Ultimately, as we shall see, Williams's doctrine of finite creativity holds together within a profound vision of Christian 'personalism' or 'hypostatic existence'. It will be the orienting purpose of this article to map how Williams coordinates a poetics from below, which takes seriously these finite processes and limits of human creativity, with a poetics from above—represented by a normative apophatic tradition that is framed by the non-dual, non-identical character of the Trinity. Both directions of travel will be seen to 'mutually illuminate' each other and converge in an ecstatic view of the human creature as becoming properly 'hypostatic' through the filial mode of creativity.

By way of ground clearing, Williams is critical of any direct likeness or superficial similarity between the divine act of creation and the human act of creativity, that is, divine and human *poesis*. This is because divine agency and human agency operate at different levels, and the failure to recognise this can lead to deep misunderstandings of both levels. As Williams writes, 'what theology might have to say to the artist is not exactly that human creativity imitates divine but almost the opposite of this [as] God acts out of a full, not an inchoate identity'⁷ while the human artist creates *in via*.⁸ As we shall see, the possibility of human beings becoming divine or properly hypostatic through a filial mode of *poesis* (Williams) is starkly contrasted with the proposal of '*theopoiesis*', defined as 'God-making' (Catherine Keller) or the 'play of mutual recreation between the human and the divine' (Richard Kearney), as both models presume a developmental view of divine creativity that flattens the two levels of human and divine

⁴ Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Morehouse, 2005), 4.

⁵ Rowan Williams, *Looking East in Winter: Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2021), 56.

⁶ The target of this comment is particularly theologies influenced by the model of God as a 'divine individual' in Williams's critical sense, and not Jewish, or otherwise non-Trinitarian theologies of art *per se*. For a sophisticated account of art in modern Jewish thought which draws on the writings of Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, see Zachary Braiterman, *The Shape of Revelation: Aesthetics and Modern Jewish Thought* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007). See also, Melissa Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image: A Jewish Theology of Art* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009).

⁷ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 164.

⁸ This might be contrasted with a tendency that conflates divine creation with inchoate human creativity or a tendency that conflates human making with divine creation *ex nihilo*. Crude versions of this first tendency are uncommon; however, theogonic accounts of divine creativity propose that God develops through creation. Consider, for example, Nikolai Berdyaev's claim that '[t]he creation of the world is creative development in God'. Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, foreword by Boris Jakim (San Rafael: Semantron Press, 2009), 128. For an appreciative recent treatment of Berdyaev, see Romilo Aleksandar Knežević, *Homo Theurgos: Freedom According to John Zizioulas and Nikolai Berdyaev* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2020). The statements of various twentieth-century painters embody the second tendency (e.g., Paul Klee's claim that 'Art is a simile of the Creation', Piet Mondrian's ambition 'not [to] follow nature's aspect and its intention [but] to create a new reality' or Paul Gauguin's enjoinder 'not [to] paint too much after nature [and to] think more of the creation which will result than of nature [c]reating like unto our Divine Master'. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Carlisle: Solway, 1997), 51-53.

agency.⁹ Similarly, treating the divine act of creation as an intense version of human creativity imposes creaturely limits on God and ostensibly collapses God and the creature into a single plane.¹⁰ Worse still, human creativity is sometimes conceived as the assertion of the individual will or the surging of the will to power,¹¹ and subsequently, the doctrine of creation has been viewed as the supreme case of the will to power.¹² In effect, there has been a problematic similarity proposed between divine and human creativity which distorts the nature of both. Conversely, to view human creativity through a theological lens without carefully attending to the finite processes and limits of human making can distort the integrity of human agency involved in the creation of art and foreclose what human art or poesis may be said to give to us. As Williams observes, there is a 'trivialising of human agency that occurs when theological judgements are invoked at the wrong level' in the discussion of human creativity.¹³ The level at which divine creation does clarify finite creativity is its capacity 'to define the nature of the love that is involved in making [insofar as God] bestows life unreservedly on what is other'.¹⁴

What the doctrine of the Trinity brings to the 'doctrine of finite creativity' is a significant shift in focus away from the individual will, and the notion of divine individuals over against each other, toward a view of the 'personal' or 'hypostatic' in God. Rather than a divine 'individual' exerting its will over against something or someone (and this supplying a model for the human artist), the persons of the Trinity are inseparably related and characterised by an excess of giving and receiving. In the life of the Trinity, there is a kind of exchange and mutuality among the persons,¹⁵ which means that we cannot make sense of the notion of a divine person (or by implication, the human artist) except in receptive and responsive relation to an excess of otherness. In the eternal filial reality of the Son, there is a dependence upon the gift of the Father and a responsiveness

⁹ For an alternative understanding of the relation between human and divine agency, and the function of apophysis, see Catherine Keller, 'The Cloud of the Impossible: Embodiment and Apophasis' in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 25-26.

¹⁰ Williams does invoke Scriptural metaphors of divine creativity that might be regarded in this light, such as Genesis 2:7, 'the scriptural idea of God creating Adam from matter by touch' as well as Isaiah 64:8, 'We are the clay, you are our potter, we are all the work of your hand'. Rowan Williams, 'Journey into Touching', Accessed 17 Feb, 2023. https://www.ctbiarchive.org/pdf_view.php?id=270 However, these figures are best understood not as literal descriptions of divine truths about creation but precisely because it is 'clear that these things are not literal descriptions of divine truths' (ST I.1.9. ad3).

¹¹ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 16. Consider, for example, Heidegger's first thesis on Nietzsche's view of art in *The Will to Power as Art* that 'Art is the most perspicuous and familiar configuration of will to power'; for Nietzsche, 'art must be grasped in terms of creators and producers, not recipients'. Martin Heidegger, *The Will to Power as Art* (London: Harper & Row, 1979), 70-71. Williams, in contrast to Nietzsche, frames artistry in terms of a productive responsiveness to what is received.

¹² Williams writes, 'creation is not an exercise of divine power, odd though that certainly sounds. Power is exercised by *x over y*; but creation is not a power, because it is not exercised on anything [...] to be a creature cannot be to be a victim of an alien force [...] God, does not need the power of a sovereign; what is, is from God'. Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 68-69.

¹³ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 10. For example, Wolterstorff argues, '[t]he person who in looking at the paintings of Paul Klee looks only for the threatening mystical message and never notices the wondrousness of the colors is practicing an heretical approach to art', in the sense that there is an analogy between the disregard for the materiality of the painting (in this case, the use of colour) and the disregard for the materiality of Christ's body in Docetism. Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, 83.

¹⁴ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 164.

¹⁵ In Andrei Rublev's *Troitsa* icon, there is a visual counterpart to this relationality in the circulating direction of gazes or gestures between and among the persons where one cannot fix one's eyes on an individual without being drawn in and deflected out toward another.

other in the artist's [work]²¹—both in the sense of the artist's reception of what is other in her environment and her responsiveness toward what she encounters through the generation of the artwork. The artist's receptive contemplation of her environment is akin to the receptivity that characterises the Son's filial relation to the Father, and the labour of producing an artwork is a type of 'making other'²² which gestures towards its 'limit case' in the 'making other' that is the Father's generation of the Son.²³ The eternal filial reality of the Son is regarded by Williams as the proper 'fountainhead' for human creativity. In abbreviated terms, there is a uniquely 'filial' style or mode of human creativity that is the mimesis of the eternal Son's relation to the Father.²⁴ And as we shall see, the realisation of this filial mode of creativity within the human being is an integral facet for Williams in the deifying process of becoming 'personal' or 'hypostatic'. Through artistic making, the human artist's relation to the otherness of her environment and her artwork comes to echo or participate inchoately in the Son's relation to the Father.

In the proceeding discussion we will examine the *poetics from above*—the generation of the Word from the Father (the ultimate form of 'making-other' for Williams)—to argue for how this relates to the order of material 'creation' which exhibits in its evolving variations of life the trinitarian pattern of 'making other'. This will be compared and contrasted with Williams's conception of the *poetics from below*—namely, human creativity considered as 're-presentation' and generative response to the excess of the material world. This will involve exploring two terms of art within Williams's corpus: (i) the idea of creatures and artworks 'giving more than they have' (i.e., excess) and (ii) the view of creatures and artworks being 'always otherwise seen' by God (i.e., the implicitly 'non-secular' character of art and the nature of the creature as created). We will then turn to the place of 'dispossession' (or 'disinterested love'²⁵) within artistic making, as this is understood by Maritain and Bulgakov, which connects the creative act most closely with the deifying process of personalisation—becoming hypostatic. In this endeavour, Williams draws into fructifying conversation Patristic accounts of asceticism, Russian religious philosophies of art connected to Christian personalism, and his engagement

²¹ *Ibid.*, 161. It is unclear whether Williams's phrasing here—the 'trinitarian birth of the other'—is intended to include both processions of generation and spiration (which are distinct in the trinitarian formulae of St Thomas that Williams elsewhere subscribes to). This would seem to be evidenced in his claim that 'the character of the divine [...] generates the eternal other [the] Son, and also the bearer of the inexhaustibility of divine life who is defined as neither Father nor as Son but simply as Spirit', as he uses the notion of 'generation' to cover the procession of spiration. However, it is charitable not to read in the full implication of the technical senses of these trinitarian formulae found in St Thomas to Williams's looser use of 'generation' in this context. See Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 159.

²² A crucial facet of 'making other' relevant to artistic making is the Incarnation of Christ, and one cannot approach the human participation in the filial reality of the Son in isolation from the act that made this possible. However, I postpone the discussion of the *imitatio Christi* and the role of the cross in Williams's thought to another article where it can be developed at greater length. I note for now that Williams has articulated 'art' in terms of 'atonement'. He writes, 'art is how we make peace with the world'. Rowan Williams, 'Seeing the Light: Epiphany in Visual Art', The Templeton Religion Trust Lecture, November 5, 2022.

²³ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 160.

²⁴ Williams appears to critique the language of art as 'imitation' or 'mimesis' but there is an element of these principles in his characterisation of art as 're-presentation', as well as an openness to using the language of the human 'imitation' or 'mimesis' of the divine in other settings. We might say in the case of 'representation' that this is not simply a 'copying' or 'reproducing' of what is encountered because there is also poetic 'addition', and in the case of the human mimesis of the divine, this is consistently qualified by paradox and apophatic reserve rather than any straightforward continuity or likeness. Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 33.

²⁵ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 161.

with twentieth-century Catholic philosophy of art to advance a vision that unearths how closely and organically ‘creation, creativity, creatureliness’ interweave.

Eternal Filial Reality

It will be illuminating as a first point of orientation for us to ask, ‘What is the Son’s relation to the Father?’ as this is so foundational to Williams’s outlook on human creativity. The first element of the relation to consider is ‘dependence’ or ‘derivation’. Thus, Williams describes the reality of the Son as the ‘acceptance of derivation from and dependence upon the Father’.²⁶ In Nicene conceptuality, the Son is said to be generated or begotten while the Father is unbegotten or un-generate.²⁷ What the recognition of the dependence of the Son authorises for Williams is the employment of the ‘poetic’ language of the Son as the Word, Image, Art, Sign, Sensus of the Father,²⁸ which will be important for his articulation of the doctrine of finite creativity.²⁹ Yet, despite derivation and dependence, the Son is affirmed as being of the same essence as the Father in ‘the credal *homoousios*’,³⁰ so instead of the Son having a secondary status in the manner of a human artwork relative to a human artist,³¹ there is a ‘divine mystery of the *real* communication of *real* sameness’ at the level of essence.³² Unlike the human artist who has an inchoate identity and cannot communicate the fullness of who she is through her artwork, the Father is identical with the pure actuality of the divine life and communicates his perfect plenitude to the Son—the Father’s ‘Art’—without reserve. Thus, the Father and the Son (and the Spirit) are identical with the essence or pure actuality of the divine life.

The second element of the Son’s relation to the Father is response to gift or bestowal. Williams writes, the ‘agency [of the Son] is entirely response to the gift from the eternal source [—the Father]’.³³ Yet, here again there is a divine mystery, as the generation of the Son from the Father ‘is not a static mirroring of “one” to “another”, as the Father is

²⁶ Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 125.

²⁷ Although Williams observes that ‘generation’ is not to be understood in the manner of Aristotle in *Metaphysics* 5.15 (and Arius following) as ‘the relation of agent to patient as it arises in consequence of a temporal event (begetting)’. Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 345.

²⁸ See Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 140, 206, and Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 85.

²⁹ Such language is significant for establishing important affinities between the identity-in-otherness of the trinitarian life and the ‘complex relation of same to other’ in the varieties of finite human creativity. Williams’s direct linguistic accounts of the Trinity—his poetics from above—are evident in his reading of Barth and Bulgakov. He writes, ‘Karl Barth’s fundamental theological insight about trinitarian theology was that the Trinity illuminated how and why God could speak to us; God is able to speak in revelation because God is primordially the God who utters God’s self to God’s self’. See Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 90. And he notes that Bulgakov, in his *Chapters on the Trinity*, sketches such a “linguistic” account of trinitarian life, seeing the relation of subject, predicate and copula as a reflection of the grammar of divinity. What is not exhausted in its bare self-identity; it is capable of being “named”, and so establishes itself as generating a kind of “tension” (in a non-pejorative sense) between its sheer exercise of being and the interwoven actuality of that being as gift and response. If all language is not to fall back into tautology (“x is what it is”), it must reflect the truth that x’s being what it is involves its being in or for what it generates in action and “feeds back” into itself as part of its definition. “x is y” states that x cannot be itself without an active exercise of being in which it is not self-identical’. Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 86–87.

³⁰ Williams, *Arius*, 235.

³¹ The caveat here being that for Williams even finite works of art are regarded as having an ‘active life’ or charisma in sense, rather being merely passive or inert.

³² Rowan Williams, ‘The Being of God’, Accessed 17 Feb, 2023. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2022/10/the-being-of-god>.

³³ Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 4.

always already the one who “breathes” Spirit’.³⁴ A simple symmetry of love given and love returned between Father and Son is reductive of the Spirit’s implication in this relation and misleading with respect to the excess of love that defines the trinitarian life. Analogously, Williams writes of the Son’s response to the Father as a love of what is mysteriously ‘more than the Father’s love for the Son’.³⁵ This recognition of the excess of the unique procession of the Holy Spirit is described as the ‘second difference’ (following the idiom of John Milbank).³⁶ In Williams’s terms, ‘in the relation of Father and Son [...] there can be no “terminus” to the act of self-giving [as its] perfect repetition in the Son is the ground of its overflow and excess in the Spirit’.³⁷ The excess of the outbreathing of the Spirit—the unique procession of the Spirit—is ‘always animating what and how we see or know Father and Son’³⁸—in a phrase borrowed by Williams from Austin Farrer, the Spirit is the ‘light blazing in the eyes of the lamb’.³⁹

Trinitarian Excess

A crucial insight from this recognition of ‘excess’ in trinitarian doctrine is that neither the divine essence nor the hypostasis of the Father, Son or Spirit can be thought of in the model of a ‘divine individual’.⁴⁰ This complex outlook means that each person or hypostasis might be said, in a paradoxical sense, to ‘give more’ than they have. It is a

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁵ Williams, ‘The Deflections of Desire’, 120.

³⁶ E.g., see Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 86.

³⁷ ‘What does love know? St Thomas on the Trinity’, *New Blackfriars* 82, no. 964 (June 2001): 260–72. It is worth noting that both Williams and John Betz appreciatively cite Thomas Weinandy’s extension of St Thomas’s trinitarian thought according to which ‘the Son’s generation is [understood to be] grounded in the Spirit, as the Spirit’s outbreathing is grounded in the Son’, which is suggestive for understandings of divine creativity in terms of the inspiration of the Spirit. Indeed, John Betz deploys Weinandy’s proposal precisely to resource a theological analogy of divine art: ‘the Father is the Eternal poet, the Son his eternal poetry, and the Spirit his eternal inspiration, who inspires the Father’s Art from the beginning’, on the basis that ‘genius and inspiration are appropriated to the Holy Spirit’. John Betz, ‘The Trinity and the Arts: Toward a Christian Poetics’ *Modern Theology*, 40, no. 1 (January 2024): 194–227.

³⁸ 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 Press, 2020).

³⁹ The question might be raised about how the doctrine of the Holy Spirit relates to Williams’s doctrine of divine and human creativity. One reason this area may appear underdeveloped in Williams’s oeuvre (except in ‘Word and Spirit’ in Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 107–28) is that he affirms the anonymity of the work of the Holy Spirit, i.e., ‘[h]is work is to witness to the Son while his own person remains hidden: he draws each unique human person in a unique and personal way to the contemplation of and participation in the Godhead imparted to humanity in the Incarnation, but conceals his own person in order to manifest and communicate only what is common to the whole Trinity’. Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 15. See also, Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 26. However, this pneumatological framing that Williams recurrently advances correlates with Lossky’s creative account of ‘sobornost’. Lossky writes, ‘[t]he *sobornost* of creative activity does not mean that all agents monotonously create the same sort of stuff, but on the contrary that every agent contributes something unique, authentic, and distinctive, something that cannot be replaced by other creators—in other words, something individual. However, each contribution of this sort is harmoniously correlated with the creative activities of other members of the Kingdom of God, and therefore the result of their creative activity is a perfect organic whole, which is infinitely rich in content’. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1957). cf. Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 167.

⁴⁰ For Williams, there is a peculiarly static and egoistic character to a monadic view of God beyond all relation, and indeed, even the ‘closed reciprocity’ or mirroring of a purely dyadic relation of desire (e.g., between the Father and the Son) would be much like a ‘sterile self-repetition’ or ‘*égoïsme à deux*’.

schema that for Williams is suggestively developed in the work of Austin Farrer. Williams writes,

God the Father gives the life that is his, which involves the giving of his freedom to be 'outside' himself; in giving his identity, we might say, he gives more than the identity of an atomised individual agency, because he is never such an agency. To give what he is he must give more than he is. And lest we should think that the Son in some sense needs his life 'supplemented', or augmented by the gift of the Spirit, we should remember that the same holds in this case: the Son does not respond to the Father as an individual who subsists at some sort of distance from or in some sort of independence of the Father, but depends on the Father for that capacity to love the Father wholly and selflessly which is the distinctive gift of the Spirit.⁴¹

Thus, we should regard each person or hypostasis as 'an identity for, with and in an Other' that cannot be collapsed into 'a "self-positing" subject prior to relation'.⁴² Just as the mystery of the Trinity is 'divine mystery of the *real* communication of *real* sameness', it is simultaneously, for Williams, the divine mystery of an 'irreducible' otherness.⁴³ To think or conceive of the divine life in this way is to inevitably imagine the 'movement', 'circulation', 'feedback' of gift. It is a pattern of identity-in-otherness or identity-in-difference. There is something excessive in the trinitarian relations that cannot be 'absorbed' or 'contained' by a sterile, static or univocal sameness. In this trinitarian connection, Williams sometimes cites the Dionysian principle that 'the Trinity is not either one or three in the sense we are used to'⁴⁴ and the Cusan term, 'non-aliud' for the 'non-otherness' / non-otherness of the Trinity.

Finite Participation in Filial Reality

We began this section by noting the centrality of the filial reality of the Son's relation to the Father for Williams's theological project. In what follows, we will examine how this creative trinitarian schema opens up the possibility of created participation in this filial reality. His own distillation of the schema is articulated through two coordinated theological principles—what he terms 'non-duality' and 'non-identity'.⁴⁵ The language of 'non-duality' is supposed to ward off binary opposition and mutual exclusion. The language of non-identity is aimed to prevent collapses into simple identity or sameness. The eternal generation of the Son, for example, is not, as we discussed, a

⁴¹ Rowan Williams, 'A Society of Two? Austin Farrer on the Trinity', in *Austin Farrer for Today: A Prophetic Agenda* (London: SCM Press, 2020).

⁴² Williams, *Arius*, 345.

⁴³ Williams writes, 'The otherness of the persons of the Trinity to each other is irreducible, and for that very reason their relation may be imagined as eros, as "yearning" rather than consummation, since no amount of self-abnegating love can abolish the eternal difference—which would in fact be to abolish love itself'. See Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 38.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁵ Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), xiv.

straightforward 'mirror', 'clone' or 'reproduction' of the Father which would be identical or sterile repetition. Rather, the claim is that in the Father's generation of the Son, 'God repeats Godself non-identically in the Trinity'⁴⁶—Williams is alert to the 'irreducible' place of 'otherness' in *divinis*. It is this eternal 'relation of Father and Son, the non-dual non-identical relation in which all finite relation is grounded'.⁴⁷

Making Other

In what way, then, does finite being participate in or echo this eternal filial relation? As we observed earlier, the Son is dependent upon the Father and responsive to the gift of the Father.⁴⁸ A vital acknowledgment of this trinitarian claim as a precondition of the coherence of the doctrine of creation is made by Athanasius against the Arians, which Williams often cites, in which he argues 'if God were not eternally the generator of the Son, the Word, we couldn't understand how God could be creator'.⁴⁹ It is part of the logic of the Son's generation within God (and the outbreathing of the Spirit) that there is an 'energy of difference, an outpouring of life into otherness'.⁵⁰ Thus, in an analogous pattern to the generation of the Son, Williams writes, '[t]o be created is to derive from an act that is not ours, but it is also to be the conduit of generative gift to the rest of the finite order, each finite agent giving in its own unique way the life that it has itself been given'.⁵¹ Each finite being—as 'giving in its own unique way'—is regarded by Williams as a 'shedder of forms'.⁵² Accordingly, 'all finite agency or movement is constituted as the flow of searching for [or] 'desiring' [...] self-renewing, self-diversifying form'.⁵³ The pattern of 'making other' in the finite order is therefore an echo of the 'timeless making

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁴⁸ Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 72.

⁴⁹ Williams, 'Creation, Creativity and Creatureliness: the Wisdom of Finite Existence' Accessed 17 Feb, 2023. <https://academic.oup.com/fordham-scholarship-online/book/23609/chapter/184784934> The Athanasian logic may also be extended to deification. A key argument for the divinity of the Logos and the deification of humanity advanced by Athanasius against the Arians was that 'unless the relation between the Father and Son is something eternally holding true of God, the relation of sonship to God cannot be realised'. Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), 51. Thus, the revelation of God in Christ—his incarnation and deification of humanity—discredits any characterisation of divinity as monadic or beyond relation (e.g., Plotinus's *One* and Arius's *Ungenerated*) by showing otherness to be intrinsic to the divine life.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 72.

⁵² Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 153.

⁵³ Most simply, 'the material order can be understood as a seeking of form'. 'Intelligent Bodies' in Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 95-125.

other that is intrinsic to God's being⁵⁴—i.e., the generation of the Son and outbreathing of the Spirit.⁵⁵ Indeed, Williams argues that the alternative atheist or monist presumption that 'at the heart of this or at the end of the tracing of it to its first principles lies an ultimate sameness, simply an endless interiority within the world' undermines the genuine otherness and excess of material objects and artworks.⁵⁶ The wider implication of this paradoxical vision for how we view finite *human* participation in the eternal filial reality of the Son's relation to the Father is developed by Williams as follows:

To speak of filiation in the context of a fully developed trinitarian schema is to speak of induction into a relation with the divine Source [i.e., the Father] which is, crucially, non-dualistic—neither an undifferentiated identity nor a confrontation of distinct self-subsisting subjects. And to pursue an understanding filiation becomes something that challenges certain models of relation between finite and infinite. It means that we cannot ultimately conceive of our relation to God as that of individual to individual; and our prayer is invited to move out of a simple model of address in the direction of what we would call an 'inhabiting', difficult⁵⁷ (appropriately) to define within the usual terms of finite interrelation, subject to subject, subject to object, substance to substance.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 159.

⁵⁵ As with Williams's loose use of 'generation' to cover the procession of generation and the procession of spiration, there is a terminological looseness with Williams's account of 'making other' within the divine life. The Athanasian creed explicitly underlines that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are not made ('non factus'). The present tense form of 'making other' advanced by Williams might be argued to fit well with the characterisation of the Trinity as 'timeless' or eternal but there remain associations with the notion of 'making' which are theologically unhelpful and which would benefit from being outlined by Williams to avoid confusion—e.g., this making is not a composition out of parts as God is simple, this making is not out of material as God is immaterial, this making is not a development or augmentation of God as God is pure actuality, this making does not follow a temporal sequence, etc. What Williams has in view in the use of his language of God timelessly making 'other' is not an otherness that implies the divine persons happen to have their own features which would undermine the Father, Son and Spirit being consubstantial (and gesture toward tri-theism) but an otherness within God that is 'distinguished only by relation, not by a chance feature'. Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 161. The question of whether the filial reality of the Son is itself an example of 'making other' would depend on whether one affirms or denies the filioque (i.e., the procession of the Spirit 'from' or 'through' the Son). Williams himself appears to affirm the filioque when he writes, 'the Spirit is concretely and actually God by being from or through the Father and the Son' and that 'Augustine did not teach a procession of the Spirit *tanquam ab uno principio* in the scholastic sense'. Williams, *On Augustine*, (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2016), 183.

⁵⁶ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 157. Milbank infers from Williams's argument that 'the atheistic or pantheistic supposition might allow art within the world, but at its margins art would be as it were cancelled, revealed as a less than serious kind of play. To *remain* with the implications of art and poetry, Williams avers, we have to allow that finite reality as such can become endlessly other to itself in a kind of finality beyond finality that implies, indeed, a "first mover"'. John Milbank, 'Scholasticism, Modernism and Modernity', 660.

⁵⁷ Williams writes with respect to difficulty in the context of trinitarian thought, 'Scripture and tradition require to be read in a way that brings out their strangeness, their non-obvious and non-contemporary qualities, in order that they may be read both freshly and truthfully from one generation to another. They need to be made more difficult before we can accurately grasp their simplicities.' See Williams, *Arius*, 236.

⁵⁸ Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 72. Indeed, on a historical note, Williams writes that, 'The spirituality of the first Christian centuries was shaped by two convictions—that Christian identity was a matter of coming to share by God's gift the relation that eternally subsists between the Logos and the divine Source; and that what we encounter in prayer is never capable of being reduced to a finished conceptual scheme'. See Rowan Williams, 'The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure' in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 115.

Thus, if it is constitutive of finite being to be ‘wholly dependent and wholly creative’, echoing the *dependence* and *responsiveness* of the Son, then it is constitutive of finite human being to realise the ‘capacity for self-representation and world-representation in such a way that how we represent ourselves to ourselves and the world to ourselves is permeated by response to eternal gift’. If the non-human material environment is a ‘shedder of forms’ then the human being is a ‘hunter of forms’.⁵⁹ To clarify the meaning of self and world representation, it will be instructive to ask what precisely is meant by the practice of ‘representation’ for Williams.

Representation

Representation⁶⁰ is a term of art in Williams’s lexicon on human making, which he argues is a feature of human language in general⁶¹ and artistic making in particular,⁶² and it is through this term that we can outline the way in which participatory knowing and being dissolves the strict borders between ‘the usual terms of finite interrelation, subject to subject, subject to object’ referred to above. What emerges is an account of the human creature as *homo poeta*.⁶³ At the most obvious level, the finite beings we encounter present themselves to us and we in turn ‘present’ them anew in our language and art. But more subtly, the active life of what is presented to us is not that of self-contained or monadic units but finite beings indissociable from their endless likenesses and correspondences.⁶⁴ In other words, finite beings disclose themselves within a network of relations or connections between other finite beings that constitutes a type of horizontal participation. No single moment or perspective from within this network can encapsulate the whole or arrest its movement. We have already had occasion to observe the participatory movement within the material order toward ‘self-diversifying form’,⁶⁵ but the continuation of this in the human case is also captured by Williams’s construal of the symbolic character of representation. Williams defines a ‘symbol’ as a cluster of meaningful relations or connections that ‘necessarily’ generate further relations and connections which he contrasts with a static model of a ‘signal’, that is, an isolated

⁵⁹ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 153. Here Williams borrows the phrasing of Geoffrey Hill.

⁶⁰ Williams ‘Understanding Our Knowing: The Culture of Representation’ in *After Science and Religion* ed. Peter Harrison and John Milbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 201–218.

⁶¹ Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 186–97. Williams writes, ‘What we say about the processes of language and specifically about what I have been calling representation is a way into constructing an anthropology as well as a theology, a picture of the human’. Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 183.

⁶² Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 36–38.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 52–53. For David Jones, the *materia poetica* constitutes a ‘sacred wood’ or ‘quarry’ of form and meaning within which the artist hunts or excavates. In other words, the artist is a hunter of available forms (*venator formarum*) whose task it is to ‘lift up’, ‘recall’, ‘re-present’ that which is discovered, mined, excavated. It is in and through this process of hunting and recalling (anamnesis) that the location of the artist—her ‘particular historic complex’, [the] whole *res* of which the poet is [herself] a product’—is embodied or summoned. David Jones, *The Anathemata: Fragments of Attempted Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 19. Yet, the modern predicament of the artist is precisely her loss of contact or touch with these ‘deposits’ of form and myths that would meaningfully locate her. Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 75–77.

⁶⁴ For Williams, what singles out a specific finite being in distinction from others ontologically is its specific ‘line’, ‘stream’ or ‘flow’ (see Bohm’s ‘rheomode’ of continuous communication in Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 180). As we shall see, this is ultimately grounded for Williams in the self-communication of God.

⁶⁵ See ‘Intelligent Bodies’ in Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 95–125.

stimulus that generates a determinate and predictable response.⁶⁶ Representation is accordingly classified as a 'spiral of self-extending symbolic activity'⁶⁷ that is 'more like re-enacting a performance than labelling an object'.⁶⁸ Thus, the act of re-presentation is probing or 'truthful' to the extent that it either unearths hidden, subtle connections that are not immediately apparent or evokes a 'hinterland' of meaning (and hence relation) that exceeds the grasp of a single perspective.⁶⁹

Finite being gives more than it has

Representation is excited by the recognition of the 'gift' or 'excess' in finite being. In Williams's Clarke lectures, it is the figure of the twentieth-century Thomist Jacques Maritain who uncovers the decisive insight that 'things give more than they have'. As Maritain writes, '[art] spreads over [things] a secret which it first discovered in them, in their invisible substance or in their endless exchanges and correspondences'.⁷⁰ In other words, there is an 'excess' that characterises material objects which the artist apprehends and transmits through the media of her artwork.⁷¹ The precise nature of this excess, which endlessly invites acts of *poesis* on the part of the artist and acts of contemplative regard on the part of the appreciator of art, is articulated variously by Williams (and his interpreters) indicating its protean nature. Consider, for example, Williams's characterisation of excess within works of modern visual art that bear an 'active presence' or 'interiority':

Sometimes you will hear people talking about the 'life', even the 'inner life', of a picture: the sense that the viewer has of not exhausting the object when all its details have been taken in, a quality that can sometimes be called enigmatic, sometimes warm, spacious, or deep. A self-portrait by Rembrandt or a landscape by Turner or Corot or Nash or one of Klee's elusive linear statements would have this kind of 'interiority' [...] Everything is 'on the surface', is the material surface, in fact. But [the] inner life is what teases or eludes us [or] resists being mastered [and] invites us to take time.⁷²

Similarly, Williams invokes the 'repetitive engagement' of the 'great Impressionist sequences' in which the subject matter resists any singular or definitive treatment, e.g., the subtle variations of light and atmosphere evoked in Claude Monet's studies of *Haystacks* (1890-91), *Water Lilies* (1897-1926) or *Rouen Cathedral* (1894). Another example of where this excess is encoded is in the numerous 'extreme' strategies of poetry. He writes,

⁶⁶ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 136.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁶⁹ It is for this reason that 'metaphors, gestures, fictions, silences' can better lay bare the 'patterns and rhythms' of finite beings than a more 'direct' description. Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 14. Indeed, 'redundancies, symbolizations, appeals to schema or context [within human language are] pervasive [...] not deviant'. See Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 50-59.

⁷⁰ Maritain quoted in Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 18.

⁷¹ For Williams, following Maritain, '[the] poetic [marks] the communion between the inner life of the objects of the world and the human self'. See Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 23. The poetic is based, not on abstraction and inference, but on a kind of 'divination' that is non-conceptual, 'pre-conscious' and intuitive in character (see Mellon lectures). Bergson's category of 'intuition' is thus adopted by Maritain as a way of expanding Thomas's account of the *intellectus*. Cf. Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 133.

⁷² Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 198.

'Extremity' in language works by pushing habitual or conventional speech out of shape—by insisting on developing certain sorts of pattern (rhyme, assonance, metre), by coupling what is not normally coupled (metaphor, paradox), by undermining surface meanings (irony) or by forcing us to relearn speaking or perceiving (fractured and chaotic language, alienating or puzzling description).

However, it should be noted that whatever the variation of excess we have already touched on, there is a certain ultimate character for Williams to the Son's relation to the Father evident in his formulation that '[t]o give what he is [the Son] must give more than he is'.⁷³ Thus, things giving more than they have (in Maritain's sense) might be said ultimately to be a resonance or echo, in Williams's view, of the primal and excessive giving within the trinitarian life.⁷⁴ Indeed, there is an analogy between the out-breathing of the Spirit and the breath-like quality of beautiful art and the life of the artist. Here Williams cites George Herbert's line about prayer being 'God's breath in man returning to his birth' to elucidate 'what it is we are secretly and slowly acclimatizing ourselves to' in the spiritual life.⁷⁵ For Przywara, whose analogical and rhythmic vision of beauty Williams draws on, 'the only place where we see the authentic suspension [...] between eternity and the fragility of transience, is in the original Gothic cathedral which communicates the heavenly breath of eternity, but at the same time does this by making hard stones so subtle that they are not only as fragile as a "breath", but downright close to "blowing away"'.⁷⁶ However, we might extend this comment to the so called 'breathing landscapes' of Joan Miró. For the art critic Harold Rosenberg, Joan Miró's *The Birth of the World* (1925) constitutes a 'major revolution in the form of painting' on the basis of converting the 'canvas into an active "field" [in which] the reverberation of the entire canvas [...] supersedes compositional structure'. He writes, 'Miró early saw that the profusion of images could be dispensed with and that the field, vibrating with textures, lines, spots, and masses of color, would be sufficient in itself'.⁷⁷

The Materiality of Artistic-making: An Interlude

Williams's excessive and eroticised account of the Trinity invites a similarly eroticised and ecstatic account of the human creature. For Williams, the possibility of the mimesis of divine desire on the part of the finite human artist is precisely through the material conditions of creatureliness. Thus, human creatures are said to become like God

⁷³ Other explications of aesthetic excess in Williams include reference to Balthasar's construal of the 'freedom of the object' and Steiner's 'real presence'. The pertinent dimension of the artwork is characterised less by the will and preference of the artist but by its 'obedience' to the 'real contingency of a world [...] with its own proper time and space, its own causality and coherence'. See Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 147-48.

⁷⁴ One problem facing any elaboration of a Thomist philosophy of art, according to Oleg Bychkov, is Heidegger's onto-theological challenge to Thomist ontology. Oleg V. Bychkov, 'Metaphysics as Aesthetics: Aquinas' Aesthetics in Present-Day Theological Aesthetics', *Modern Theology* 31, no. 1 (January 2015): 147-78. For a recent theological critique of Heidegger's poetics that is broadly consonant with Williams's own rendition of the analogy between human poesis and trinitarian creation *ex nihilo*, see Steven Toussaint, 'Redeeming Poetics', *Modern Theology* 40, no. 1 (January, 2024): 21-45.

⁷⁵ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 159.

⁷⁶ Erich Przywara, 'Beautiful, Sacred, Christian' in *Analogia Entis: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014). See also, Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 245-46.

⁷⁷ Harold Rosenberg, 'Miró' in *Art on the Edge* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 22-38.

precisely by ‘living into [their] createdness’ and by ‘accepting limit’.⁷⁸ It has been a significant argument of Williams’s to dismantle the perception that

God is known only when the material world is not, when physical and temporal actuality are absent. Behind these ideas is the obstinate myth of a rivalry between finite and infinite, physical and spiritual, temporal and eternal. The infinite/spiritual/eternal is configured as that which stands at the opposite end of a spectrum from the finite/physical/temporal, so that the two terms cannot be applicable in a single context. There is ample argument to show that this is a fundamental distortion of the Christian theological project, but it recurs consistently, obscuring the various resources in the tradition for understanding the universal presence at the root of the finite of infinite activation, and the exploration of the inseparability of formative intelligible action and materiality in the particulars of a finite and temporal world.⁷⁹

It is from this vantage that we can appreciate his temporalized view of the human artist,⁸⁰ his concern with ‘faces that are lived-in’ in the portraiture of Rembrandt, Gwen John and Celia Paul, his insistence on works of art that ‘slow our metabolism’ and ‘encode in [themselves] the time that art takes’.⁸¹ As Milbank discerns, ‘[Williams] has a far greater concern than Balthasar with the *making process* rather than simply with the poetic upshot and its reception’.⁸² In this sense, Williams’s artistic concerns lie close to those artists for whom the process of making is itself accented. Williams appreciatively cites Auden’s dictum that ‘poetry is a way of happening’ and emphasises the gestural basis of human language.⁸³ A similar concern is echoed in the American ‘action’ painters, or Richard Serra’s concept of ‘sculpture as verb’. Rosenberg designated the ‘action’ painters as those New York based artists operating in the 1950s for whom the canvas was ‘an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze or “express” an object, actual or imagined’. Thus, whether it is the ‘drip technique’ deployed in Jackson Pollock’s *Number 1/Lavender Mist* (1948) or the splattering of molten metals in Serra’s work or the performance of his *Verb List* (1967) featuring works titled by the infinitives, ‘to tear’, ‘to dapple’, ‘to crumple’ etc., there is a recognition of the integral place of gesture and material happening in the creative process.

⁷⁸ Thus, Williams writes of the ‘central theme of accepting human limitation’. Williams, *On Augustine*, 32.

⁷⁹ Rowan Williams, ‘Understanding Our Knowing: The Culture of Representation’ in *After Science and Religion*, ed. Peter Harrison and John Milbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 210.

⁸⁰ Consider Williams’s positive interpretation of the *distention anima* in Augustine or the theme of *epektasis* in Gregory of Nyssa. Williams writes, ‘Human nature is seen as *essentially* restless, precarious, mobile and variegated, because of its orientation towards a reality outside itself. The movement of history and biography is made possible and meaningful by its reference to God; he meets us *in* history, yet extends beyond it, is always, so to speak, ahead of it. Here if anywhere are the foundations for a Christian account both of history and human individuality. This is Christianity’s major revision of the philosophical assumptions of Greek antiquity’. Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 58.

⁸¹ Rowan Williams, ‘Art and the Religious Imagination: A Conversation with Rowan Williams’ delivered at the Sainsbury Wing Theatre for the Association of Art History, Nov. 2021. Accessed 25 Oct, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y11iubPTcj>.

⁸² John Milbank, ‘Scholasticism, Modernism and Modernity’.

⁸³ He writes, ‘[t]he origins of linguistic capacity lie in pitched and differentiated sound allied to gesture (including dance); the body enters into a process of seeking continuity with what is both sensed internally and perceived externally’. Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 28.

At this juncture, it is worth noting how Williams's philosophy of art extends beyond Maritain's philosophy of art in the relative significance accorded by Williams to the material process of making.⁸⁴

For Maritain, the artist creates based on a non-conceptual 'creative intuition' which contains 'the totality of the work to be engendered [...] already present in advance'.⁸⁵ By contrast, Williams invokes Richard Sennett's notion of the 'material consciousness' of the craftsperson which is displayed in the artist's 'continual dialogue with materials'.⁸⁶ In this sense, Williams may be more closely aligned with Etienne Gilson, for whom 'the knowledge by the intellect of the proper way of making something here resides jointly in the intellect that knows and in the hands that make'.⁸⁷ In defence of Maritain, Williams does refer to his rejection of 'art [as] the embodiment of an artist's idea',⁸⁸ citing Maritain who mocks the notion of 'an ideal model sitting for the artist in his brain, the work supposedly being a copy or portrait of it'.⁸⁹ However, overall, Williams concedes that there is a priority given to the 'embodied encounter' with God in Gilson's writing that is not developed in Maritain's. He writes, 'Various members of the "Radical Orthodoxy" network of theologians have indicated a preference for Gilson over Maritain as an interpreter of Aquinas, because of his more robust insistence that philosophy needs to take its cues from a theology grounded in historical revelation, and thus from the embodied encounter with the infinite act of being rather than any abstract awareness of being as such'.⁹⁰ Indeed, a further emphasis on the bodily character of artistic making is found in Williams's engagement with Merleau-Ponty⁹¹ and Bulgakov—the former emphasising the animality of our knowing and the latter emphasising the directedness of the human creature toward sensuous self-awareness. Williams writes,

⁸⁴ For a similar argument concerning the relation between Maritain and Gilson see Armund Augustine Maurer, *About Beauty: A Thomistic Interpretation*, (Houston, Texas: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1983), and George Pattison, *Art, Modernity and Faith*, (London: SCM Press, 1998).

⁸⁵ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Providence, RI, Cluny Media, 2018), 123. Similarly, Maritain was inclined to dismiss abstract art in principle precisely because of its abstraction from the 'actuality of objects' encountered in the material environment. Williams by contrast reasons that abstraction still trades in 'the concrete relations of colour and physical shape' and cites Malevich's later abstract work as embodying his search for 'attunement to underlying harmonics' (discussed in his writings) despite nominally advancing works 'divorced from "nature"'. Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 19.

⁸⁶ See 'Speech and Time' in Williams, *The Edge of Words*.

⁸⁷ Étienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), 35; Armand A. Mauer, *About Beauty: A Thomistic Interpretation* (Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1983), 98.

⁸⁸ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 26.

⁸⁹ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), 124.

⁹⁰ Rowan Williams, 'Atlantic Intellectual: The Life of an Extraordinary French Scholar'. Accessed 17 Feb, 2023. <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/atlantic-intellectual/>.

⁹¹ Williams notably follows Merleau-Ponty's recognition of the 'animality' of the artist's perception. He writes, 'there is a need to recognise that the practices [of representation] that deliver "knowledge" are embedded in a material environment in various ways that will remain obscure. In a helpful phrase of Orion Edgar's [used to express the thought of Merleau-Ponty], "nature lies on both sides of perception"; perceiving is part of our "animality", not the work of some active, independent spiritual subject upon a passive external world. It makes sense to say that non-human organisms "know" their environs, but rather than this being a springboard for the reduction of human knowledge to an instinctive or mechanical level, it should be a prompt to rethink intelligence itself as extending to the non-human in significant ways'. Peter Harrison and John Milbank, *After Science and Religion*, 205. For Williams's constructive treatment of Merleau-Ponty, see Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 99-114; Williams 'Understanding Our Knowing: The Culture of Representation' in Peter Harrison and John Milbank, *After Science and Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2022) and Williams, 'Faith in the Modern Areopagus' Accessed 17 Feb, 2023. <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/faith-in-the-modern-areopagus/>.

The sophiological perspective dissolves crude oppositions between spirit and body, and allows us to imagine a world that is not only self-aware but *sensually* aware of itself. All earthly realities are grounded in an ideal reality that is also a kind of eternally self-aware *materiality*, since there is no thought without matter and concrete action [...] We have some sense even now of the interconnectedness of the material world, and so can begin to make sense of the sophianic hope for bodily transformation.⁹²

Finite Being as Always Otherwise Seen

In Williams's aesthetic writings there is an acknowledgement of the material object or art object as unknown or hidden in important respects: 'its shadow and its margins, its absences and ellipses'.⁹³ Such unknown facets of the artwork and material objects connect with what Williams terms the non-secular character of art and aesthetic response. This is not the rehearsal of an unhelpful dualism of the sacred and secular but a gesture toward an alternative to an entirely functional and instrumental way of looking at finite reality (what Williams terms 'programmatically secularism'). The implicitly sacred or 'non-secular' character of the work of art is, on this view, 'foundationally, a willingness [on the part of the artist and the part of the appreciator of art] to see things or other persons as the objects of another sensibility than my own, perhaps also another sensibility than *our* own, whoever "we" are, even if the "we" is humanity itself'.⁹⁴ Two poems that exemplify this non-secular awareness for Williams are T.S. Eliot's 'Burnt Norton' ('the unseen eyebeam crossed for the roses/ Had the look of flowers being looked at') and R.S. Thomas's 'Via Negativa' ('We look at people/ And places as though he had looked/ At them too; but miss the reflection').⁹⁵ In this connection, Williams tends to evoke the bodily limits of given finite perspectives through observations like—'I cannot see my own face', 'I cannot see the back of my head' or 'I cannot walk around my body'. He writes, 'the sensorium of an individual body alone cannot deliver a coherent picture of the world or a coherent account of the body'.⁹⁶ Although the question may be raised about possible slippage between terms like 'other perspectives', 'inaccessible perspectives', 'infinite perspectives' and a divine perspective, there is an inherently apophatic dimension to the material object and work of art for Williams.⁹⁷ The favouring of a theological over an a-theological account of the negativity of the work of art would seem to

⁹² Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, 128. We should note that the type of sensuous inter-relation envisaged here parallels in a material and creaturely mode, the type of interrelation which defines the hypostatic life of the Trinity.

⁹³ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 147.

⁹⁴ Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2012), 13.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ See Williams, 'Faith in the Modern Areopagus'. Accessed 17 Feb, 2023. <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/faith-in-the-modern-areopagus/>.

⁹⁷ Williams advocates for a species of non-relativist perspectivalism. He writes, 'any individual's claim to knowledge is "perspectivally" marked, but this gives no ground to relativism in the popular sense. The perspectival is always already a matter of recognising the self's implication in other perspectives'. Williams 'Understanding Our Knowing: The Culture of Representation', 205. Indeed, Catherine Pickstock, commenting on the methodology of Williams's Gifford lectures, writes of his 'Coleridgean bias towards the partial truth of any human perspective' which she associates with the fact that he 'populates his discourse by invoking bystanders, exemplars and witnesses'. Catherine Pickstock, 'Matter and Mattering: The Metaphysics of Rowan Williams', *Modern Theology* 31, no. 3 (July 2015): 599-617.

rest on the possibility that simple divine knowledge (if true) would exceed even an infinity of finite perspectives, thus rendering the latter category of an infinity of finite views itself susceptible to final negation. The recurring argument in Williams's corpus is that there is an 'always otherwise seen' character to art which ultimately implies an infinite divine perspective,⁹⁸ and it is this that places Williams, once again, in the current of Nicholas of Cusa on the *coincidentia oppositorum*.⁹⁹ Williams writes,

when we invoke a God's-eye perspective as our final horizon on the world, we are, in that very act, acknowledging the always receding horizon of our knowing; we are recognizing that representation for us has no end, because we cannot occupy the entire range of possible perspectives from which something can be seen. And, whatever God knows, it is not the ensemble of finite perspectives but something of another order.¹⁰⁰

Possession and Repulsion

However, there are factors for Williams that can influence the artist in such a way that they do not properly 'see' what is before them. In other words, there are distortions of perception that prevent the artist from properly recognising the excess or gift of finite being. Despite Williams's focus on modern art and literature, the most incisive sources for diagnosing this type of aesthetic problem are found for him in the Christian ascetical tradition (especially the fourth to eighth centuries),¹⁰¹ and particularly the figures of Maximus and Evagrius.¹⁰² Such sources interrogate the role of 'passion' within our perception of the world or other persons (i.e., the distorting role of anger, lust and rivalrous relation more broadly). Even though the artist and her environment are mutually related and interdependent, the presence of certain passionate instincts can lead the artist to flatten what she encounters to the agenda of a private will or ego. Williams writes, '[t]he body's habitual response to stimuli has become either defence or absorption (anger or lust), so that we are chronically unable to exist as part of an interdependent created order'.¹⁰³ Such passionate ways of seeing are thought to misalign our perception with

⁹⁸ Rowan Williams, 'Negative Theology: Some Misunderstandings', *Modern Theology* 40, no. 1 (January 2024): 243-55. For a further account of art as non-secular see Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 11-22.

⁹⁹ Williams embraces the apophatic theology of Cusanus for whom God is *non-aliud* (not other). Indeed, following Margaret Masterman, he criticises the 'principle of non-contradiction within a single framework'. Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 128.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹⁰¹ Rowan Williams, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2018), 73. For an affiliated discussion of how Simone Weil's notion of *attente* connects to this ascetic tradition, see Rowan Williams, 'Attending to Attention', *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 58, no. 4 (December 2023): 1099-1111. <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12920>

¹⁰² Williams refers to Evagrius's distinction between human, angelic and diabolical thought. See Williams, *Being Human*, 74 and Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 62. For the function of 'diabolical' thought in Dostoevsky, see Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2008). On the latter, he writes, 'the demonic always "derealizes" or "discarnates", distracts us from the body and the particular'. See Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 82. The demonic is associated with 'the prospect of the end of history, imagination, and speech, the dissolution of human identity'. See Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 14.

¹⁰³ Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 25.

the agenda of individual ego and ostensibly 'replace [...] reality with a simulacrum'.¹⁰⁴ The two crucial distortions of our perception (lust and anger) are apparent in 'the compulsion either to devour on the one hand or to expel or repulse on the other'.¹⁰⁵ This is not, as Williams is clear to underline, a critique of passion *per se* or the 'instinctual life as such'.¹⁰⁶ Rather, it is a recognition of the need for certain instinctual impulses or reflexes to be 'rerouted' or 'educated' for us to see things as they are, beyond any immediate use to us. The genuine contemplation of the material order and human creativity as such requires a certain kind of asceticism,¹⁰⁷ or as we shall see, 'dispossession'.¹⁰⁸

Creation is regarded by Williams as a web of signs to be read and symbols to be seen—in their divine relatedness (*propter deum*). But this is not a static mirroring of God by created beings. Rather, it is precisely in the fluid or mobile pattern of on-going exchange and inter-dependence among creatures that God is analogously 'read' or 'seen'. The creature is an image (*imago*), word (*logos*) or sign (*signum*) of God not in an atomised or frozen sense, but within this unfolding and generative spiral of exchange and developing relation between and among creatures. A proper 'seeing' and 'reading' of creatures (and 'creatureliness') is a seeing and reading of creatures that is not functional to our own 'self-referential desires' or 'passions' but rather as 'always otherwise seen and known by God' or as 'read by God'. A passion-free and 'symbolic' way of seeing and relating to creation—as image, word, sign of God—constitutes a 'mediational presence' that remotely participates in the filial relation of the Son to the Father—the Son as the Image, Word, Sign of the Father. How does this relate to the practice of art? Williams observes,

Maximos's scheme lays the foundation for an aesthetic as well as an ethic, and allows us to think of human creativity itself as an attempt to align the *eros* of the artist with the *eros* of the material around: the artist is far from being a creator *ex nihilo* because s/he is always feeling for the 'impulse' in this or that aspect of the world that is moving towards a new and more nourishing relatedness, to the rest of the material order as well as to the human understanding. Those artists who insist that their work is nothing to do with the will as we normally understand it are echoing in different terms the Maximian concern for dispassionate seeing.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 82. For a useful discussion of the 'education of passion' along these lines, see Williams, *Being Human*, 73-77. In this context, Williams defines 'passion' as 'designat[ing] two things: the uncritical affirmation of the ego, and the positioning of that ego in a state of struggle and rivalry'. Apatheia on this model is concerned with 'rerouting' our passionate responses 'away from the world of contest, struggle and rivalry'. See Williams, *Being Human*, 75.

Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 18.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁰⁶ Williams, *Being Human*, 75.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 56. Similarly, Williams notes in connection to Maritain's thought that 'the artist exercises intellect with such detachment that the effect is a sort of image of sanctity, a contemplative absorption in what is truly there'. See Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 16. It should be borne in mind that 'absorption' is used positively here to convey 'mutual relation' rather than a species of 'passionate' seeing. In his reading of Maritain, artistic 'dispossession' involves, detachment, 'withdrawal', 'disinterested love'.

¹⁰⁸ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 161.

¹⁰⁹ Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 55.

Creativity and Dispossession

We turn now to the theme of dispossession in artistic making as this is articulated by Williams. The three key sources of Williams's developed view are Jacques Maritain, David Jones and Sergii Bulgakov.¹¹⁰ In Williams's reading of Maritain, he notes the Thomist distinction between art (human making) and prudence (wisdom) as virtues of the practical intellect where prudence concerns the perfection of the human agent whereas art concerns the perfection of the thing to be made (i.e., the work of art). However, he importantly nuances this division in two subtle ways. First, following David Jones, Williams discerns that the virtue of prudence concerns the 'construction of a life that can be read', that is, 'a life that signifies'.¹¹¹ Second, Williams discerns that the creation of a work of art 'does have a serious moral character simply because it pushes aside the ego and the desire of the artist as an individual'.¹¹² Hence, the moral life can be said to be inherently 'artistic' because our actions are signs that can be read by others, and the artistic life can be said to be moral in the sense of requiring disciplined or non-passionate ways of seeing. Indeed, what is at stake in art is a kind of love. Williams writes,

The pivotal distinction between art and prudence [...] should not [...] obscure the interconnectedness of human making and the human vocation to *caritas*, to love that exhibits some participation in God's act.¹¹³

On a Thomist understanding, love means 'willing the good of the other' and the unique iteration of this in the practice of art is the artist willing the good of the thing to be made. As Williams writes, 'the integrity of what is made is the mode of the artist's love'.¹¹⁴ More specifically, Williams invokes the texture of the artist's love as a type of 'dispossession, disinterested love'.¹¹⁵ Two elements of this type of dispossessive love are 'withdrawal'¹¹⁶ and 'bestowal'¹¹⁷ which it will be important to define. The element of bestowal in artistic making—that is, the 'bestowal [of] life' or 'imagining into life' of artistic form—is perhaps what connects human creativity most closely with sanctity or holiness.¹¹⁸

We have already had occasion to note that divine creation illuminates finite creativity in its capacity 'to define the nature of the love that is involved in making [insofar as

¹¹⁰ Williams observes that 'there are many links to be explored between what Maritain has to say about art and what Bulgakov says about it'. See Williams, 'Creation, Creativity and Creatureliness: the Wisdom of Finite Existence'. Accessed 17 Feb, 2023. <https://academic.oup.com/fordham-scholarship-online/book/23609/chapter/184784934>.

¹¹¹ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 88-89. Cf. Williams's account of narrative negativity.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 161. I do not have space in this article to treat Williams's kenoticism in depth. However, a significant caution concerning Williams's kenotic theology of the Trinity is whether his reception of the modern trinitarian thought of Sergii Bulgakov (and Hans Urs von Balthasar) can be reconciled with the Augustinian and Thomist coordinates of his thought. The challenge in view here, associated with Karen Kilby's critique of Balthasar, is whether Williams risks inadvertently absorbing the mystery of evil into the mystery of God and distorting the non-competitive relation between God and the human creature that is otherwise so integral to his theological project. For Kilby's recent critique of Williams, see Karen Kilby, 'Closer to God: Expansive Survey of How to Speak about Christ', *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 6089, December 2019.

¹¹⁶ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 150.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

God] bestows life unreservedly on what is other'.¹¹⁹ Further in this vein, Williams writes, 'there is no "godlikeness" without such [artistic] bestowal'¹²⁰ and that 'without [artistic making] we should not fully see what sanctity is about'.¹²¹ The quality of artistic making as loving bestowal is thus a mode of 'participation in God's act'.¹²² It is at this border that artistic making and sacramentality touch for Williams,¹²³ yet it is also a cautionary meeting-point. Whether it is the sacraments proper, which directly participate in the Art of the Father,¹²⁴ or the human creature becoming properly 'hypostatic' through the filial mode of creativity, there is an absolute priority for Williams of the act of divine grace and the *gifted* character of our participation in this reality. There can be no reduction of deification to human art or aestheticism *per se*. As Bulgakov himself writes in a passage translated by Williams, the eschatological goal of the human creature 'cannot be fulfilled by the powers of art and human will alone, but presupposes also the influence of God's grace'.¹²⁵ This distinction is pointedly made by Williams in his commentary on Bulgakov in which he writes,

[A]ll things press towards beauty. Dostoevsky's 'Beauty will save the world' is one of Bulgakov's favourite quotations; but he is careful to insist that this is not a religious transposition of aestheticism. The beauty that saves is God's Sophia acting within the creative sphere and pushing it to its eschatological goal, not any finite aesthetic achievement.¹²⁶

The second element we will examine is artistic withdrawal. For Williams, the artist is said to withdraw her 'individual emotional agenda'¹²⁷ and anything that 'obscures both the original moment of encounter, the original object in the world, and its concrete life'.¹²⁸ This is the notion of withdrawing any ulterior motives which would undermine the communication of the depth, excess or richness of what the artist apprehends. Once again, there is a need for dispassionate seeing at the point of the artist's reception of the material environment and her inception of the artwork. Bulgakov echoes this emphasis for Williams on withdrawal or 'letting something be'¹²⁹ and likens this aspect of human creativity to both the divine love involved in creation and the inner trinitarian life. However, the analogy of love between these moments of human creativity, divine creation and Trinity, is, in Bulgakov's work, more questionably framed by the concept of 'divine withdrawal'. One problem with this equation of human and divine withdrawal

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*, 165.

¹²³ The artistic act of bestowing form is simultaneously the bestowal of a 'sign', which carries theological implications. The artwork as a sign, in other words, and following David Jones, 'implies the sacred'. Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 86.

¹²⁴ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 206.

¹²⁵ Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1999), 159.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹²⁷ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 152.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹²⁹ See Williams, 'Creation, Creativity and Creatureliness: the Wisdom of Finite Existence'. Accessed 17 Feb, 2023. <https://academic.oup.com/fordham-scholarship-online/book/23609/chapter/184784934>

is that the human artist's withdrawal is primarily characterised by Williams as a withdrawal from certain fallen propensities which obscure contact with reality (e.g., self-centred desires and emotional agendas) which simply do not apply in the divine case. In what sense then might God be said to withdraw from himself in his triune life or in creation? We might say that divine withdrawal is about willing the integrity of the other as *other*,¹³⁰ but if withdrawal is seen to be required of God for the good of creation, then this would seem to mean that more of one (the divine) means less of the other (the creature), which would mark a competitive relation between the two terms. Williams's negative theology consistently emphasises the absence of limitation in God while Bulgakov's language of divine withdrawal implies voluntary self-limitation. Indeed, the Kabbalistic principle of '*tzimtzum*' which Bulgakov draws on to articulate divine withdrawal proposes that God 'contracts' to make space for creation, which similarly implies a competitive and quasi-spatialised relation between God and creature that Williams elsewhere rejects.¹³¹

Becoming Hypostatic

At this point we are able to transition to Williams's account of filial creativity as realising properly 'personal' or 'hypostatic' existence. To grasp the nature of this claim and the meaning of 'person' that is at stake, it will be important to indicate the indebtedness of Williams's account to key twentieth-century Eastern Orthodox varieties of personalism developed by Lossky (on whom Williams wrote his doctoral thesis), Bulgakov, Fr Sophrony and Yannaras. Williams observes that these figures 'derive the idea of the personal from a Christologically informed doctrine of the divine image'.¹³² In other words, the 'personal' or 'hypostatic' reality of the Son comes to inform what it means to be 'personal' or 'hypostatic' as a divine image of the Son. More specifically, the relation between the Son and the Father becomes a relational model for the doctrine of the image of God or created personhood.¹³³ If the eternal persons of the Trinity cannot be regarded as 'divine individuals', so, by analogy, created persons cannot be regarded as isolated individuals either. Williams therefore develops a relational language for hypostases that moves away from describing self-contained subjects toward evoking 'interfaces' or

¹³⁰ It is unclear what a withdrawing love of the other as 'other' would mean in the divine case as the 'otherness' of God from creation—his *non-aliud* character—is unlike any kind of otherness in creation (e.g., the otherness of created subjects and things relative to each other). On a Thomist account, God's love of the creature is not a love for what is 'other' to God in the sense of creation being straightforwardly 'external' to God or somehow autonomous from God. Rather, the creature exists at all by virtue of gifted participation in the divine, so it is more appropriate to say God loves the creature 'in' God than God loving the creature 'outside' God. Hence, even this qualified sense of divine withdrawal is strained.

¹³¹ Williams, *On Augustine*, 143.

¹³² Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 123.

¹³³ In Williams's reading of Fr Sophrony, he offers a more provocative formulation according to which 'the human potential given by God in creation [is] not simply [to be] a "created hypostasis", a centre of communication and intercommunication within the world, but a "universal centre", a place where the boundaryless action of God occurs; the eternal "I Am" is now uttered in the creaturely "I" [And he goes on to compare this with Coleridge's notion of] the repetition in time of the eternal "I AM"'. See Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 98.

‘points’ within a network of relations.¹³⁴ He writes, ‘each person/logos is unique because each position in the network of relating is unique’.¹³⁵

Accordingly, Williams advances an argument of Lossky’s to the effect that the language of ‘person’ conveys *who* someone is in their active relatedness to world and God—rather than merely *what* something is, considered as ‘the bare instantiation of natural characteristics’.¹³⁶ The ‘personal’ is therefore characterised in terms of ‘self-transcending relation’ or ‘relation-building’.¹³⁷ It is not an abstract ascription but paradigmatically involves experience and mutual encounter. Thus, Williams adopts Lossky’s language of ‘conscious relation’¹³⁸ and ‘personal encounter’ as well as affirming Yannaras’s concern with ‘the event and experience of relation [...] the experience of participation’.¹³⁹ The relational character of the personal is manifest in both the trinitarian life and the life of the created persons as mutual exchange, communication, communion and interpenetration (*perichoresis*). The pertinence of these relational trinitarian insights to the doctrine of finite creativity is clear. Thus, for example, just as Christ’s relation to the Father is that of eternal responsiveness to the Father’s gift, so the image of God or created personhood is said to be constituted by finite creative responsiveness to the divine gift.¹⁴⁰ Williams writes, ‘the finite intelligent and creative [person] exists as essentially a reflection of this eternal responsiveness’.¹⁴¹ Similarly, as we have had occasion to note in Williams’s engagement with Bulgakov, there is a parallelism between the hypostaticity of the Trinity and the divinely initiated movement of the creature toward a sensuous type of inter-relation defined by ‘self-aware *materiality*’. Indeed, as Williams discerns, ‘our [hypostatic] role in creation is quite specifically to bring the environment more fully alive in its Sophianic interdependence’.¹⁴² If it is part of the vocation of the human to ‘personalise’ the cosmos, then Rosenblum’s case that the Northern romantic painters ‘could experience [living organisms like trees or flowers] as if they were particularised, humanoid creatures’ would seem to position this period of visual art as a germane illustration of this sophianic concern.¹⁴³ The hypostatic existence of the human

¹³⁴ Thus, following Yannaras, Williams claims that Christ as *Logos* of the Father informs the doctrine of the divine image as itself *logos*, that is, “‘logical” in the sense [that] it can be understood and expressed only in relation’. Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 126.

¹³⁵ Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 126.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 122. See also Williams’s reading of Bonhoeffer on the question of ‘who?’ in Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 185.

¹³⁷ Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 122.

¹³⁸ Notably, Williams extends the ascription of ‘consciousness’ to the divine life in his reading of St Thomas. He writes, ‘God is in some graspable way conscious. We have just seen it established that God is not only conscious but specifically conscious in joy or bliss of all that he does and is’. See Williams, ‘What does love know?’ *New Blackfriars* 82, no. 964 (June 2001): 260–72.

¹³⁹ Yannaras quoted in Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 7.

¹⁴⁰ Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 127.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁴² Rowan Williams, ‘Bulgakov’s Christology’ delivered at an international conference entitled ‘Building the House of Wisdom: Sergii Bulgakov 150 years after his birth’ in the University of Fribourg, September 2021. Accessed 17 Feb, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-3grnK6E00&t=5465s>. In Williams’s earlier writing, he expresses some reservations about Bulgakov’s seemingly gnostic language of the ‘uncreated’ aspect of the human constitution but provides the following defence: ‘the spirit in us is not a thing that is brought into being like material objects; it is a relation, to God and others and the natural, given environment, that can have no beginning in time, since God’s side of the relation is eternal’. Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, 169, 173.

¹⁴³ Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 37.

being in its network of relations is thus 'the place where the world becomes personal'¹⁴⁴ as 'hypostatic existence is intrinsically a form of life characterised by care'.¹⁴⁵ Put another way, the 'art [exercised by the human hypostasis] cannot be separated from the quest for justice [in interpersonal relations and the creative care of the material environment]'.¹⁴⁶

To clarify this emphasis on relationality and conscious awareness, it will be important to note the crucial apophatic logic of the 'hypostatic' in the life of the Trinity.¹⁴⁷ Following Lossky, Williams writes, 'the unifying theme [of Christian apophaticism] is what might be called personalism: [...] the central and controlling idea of the system is that of the personal subject in the context of its relations with other subjects. In theology, it expresses a view which locates all dogmatic construction and reflection in the context of living personal experience, encounter with the personal God, in the Christian community'.¹⁴⁸ As Williams writes, 'the negative is associated with the *'ek-static'*, the discovery of identity in self-transcending relation'.¹⁴⁹ However, for Williams, there is a temptation to view the 'personal' as the knowable or revealed aspect of God and the divine essence as the hidden or unknowable aspect. If we are to avoid partitioning God, the apophatic recognition of God as unknowable in his essence must extend to each hypostasis of the Trinity.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, the created hypostasis is not exempt from this apophatic status. Rather than being a self-standing object or individual, the created person exists as a mode of gifted participation in the filial reality of the eternal Son's relation to the eternal Father through the eternal Spirit. Williams writes, '[t]o inhabit this reality is to be assimilated to this "hypostatic" world'.¹⁵¹

Conclusion

We opened this investigation of *poesis* with Williams's observation about the precarity of too close an association between the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of finite creativity, which was seen to misleadingly foreground the place of the individual will and distort understandings of both divine and human creativity on their own terms. The alternative path followed by Williams was to look toward the doctrine of the Trinity for a *poetics from above* and toward the finite processes and limits of human creativity for a *poetics from below*. Williams's *poetics from above* was

¹⁴⁴ Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, 169.

¹⁴⁵ Williams, 'Bulgakov's Christology'. Here, Williams argues that it is constitutive of hypostatic existence to be 'ceaselessly productive of and affirming of otherness'. What Bulgakov offers is an 'innovative reconstruction of the idea of the divine image as carrying with it a definition of the personal as fundamentally invested in care and nurture for the environment, external and internal'.

¹⁴⁶ Williams, 'Creation, Creativity and Creatureliness: The Wisdom of Finite Existence'. Accessed 17 February, 2023. <https://academic.oup.com/fordham-scholarship-online/book/23609/chapter/184784934>.

¹⁴⁷ For Williams, *apophasis* is not merely a 'branch' or region of theology but a 'method' or 'attitude [that] should undergird all theological discourse'. See Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 2. It is not the intellect or the will alone that is activated in the method of apophasis on Williams's understanding but the whole person in a 'self-negating movement away from its centre'.

¹⁴⁸ Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 18-19.

¹⁴⁹ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, xiii.

¹⁵⁰ He writes, '[There is] a certain risk of polarising hidden essence and revealed persons. It should be clear that any division of God's life into the bit you can see and the bit you can't see is unsustainable. [...] the difficulty lies in not allowing the negative moment to reach into our discourse about the persons and reconstruct this'. See Williams, 'The Deflections of Desire'.

¹⁵¹ Williams, *Looking East in Winter*, 98.

articulated through several theses: (i) the divine persons are inseparably related in patterns of exchange and mutuality, (ii) there is a fecundity and excess to the divine life manifest in the pattern of 'making other' (i.e., the generation of the Son and the spiration of the Spirit), and (iii) the Son is in receptive and responsive relation to Father. Williams's poetics from below centres on the phenomenology of re-presentation in art and language, which he argues exhibits a receptive and responsive relation between the artist and the excess of her material environment that is analogous to the Son's receptive and responsive relation to the Father (claim 'iii' of the poetics from above). The excess that is at play within artistic making is explored in more depth via Williams's notion of finite 'things giving more than they have' and the quality of finite things being 'always otherwise seen'. Things giving more than they have was argued to be analogous to (and a remote manifestation of) the sense of the divine persons 'giving more than they are' (claim 'ii' of the poetics from above), and finite things being 'always otherwise seen' was argued to be both an implication of art and a claim to a type of inexhaustibility that necessarily goes beyond any purely immanent or 'secular' ontology. Weaving together and extending the pivotal work of Jacques Maritain and Sergii Bulgakov, two of the leading twentieth-century religious philosophers of art in (Thomist) Catholicism and (Sophianic) Orthodoxy respectively, Williams advances an account of the creative act as species of dispossessive love. When 'love is alive' in the creative act, the good of the otherness and integrity of the artwork is pursued in a manner that Williams argues to be an echo of the dispossessive love within the trinitarian life and divine act of creation. Finally, the coordination of these two approaches (from above and from below) was argued to cohere within a profound, ecstatic and 'personalist' view of the human creature as becoming properly 'hypostatic' via the *filial* mode of creativity.