

THE WHITE LINE: ROWAN WILLIAMS ON TIME AND TRAGEDY

BY

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Declaration

By submitting this thesis, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the authorship owner thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Date: 29/8/2014

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Abstract

In this study, I will be concerned with the viability of a tragic theology that is at the same time able to cohere with the standards of a classically orthodox Christian theology. My study will focus on a particular figure, namely Rowan Williams who, I will argue, exemplifies a blending together of these two concerns. However, as we shall see in this study, 'tragic theology' is by no means an uncontroversial affair since some argue that it implies heterodox conclusions in relation to God, creation, sin, etc. My aim is to counteract this claim that a classically orthodox theology cannot coexist with a tragic perspective. I will make the claim that tragic theology aims to emphasise the reality of contingency, conflict and suffering in relation to human life as seriously as possible, without effacing the difficulty it proposes to thought and the limits of human action, while at the same time holding onto the conviction that these beliefs can exist comfortably with an orthodox theological perspective. Through my study of Williams, which will largely follow a genealogical approach, I aim to show that Williams is able to emphasise this difficulty of tragedy, while at the same time believing in the fundamental goodness of creation, the possibility of transformation, hope and healing, as understood within a incarnationally-centred understanding of 'the redemption of time'. Systematically speaking, I will attempt to arrange Williams' understanding of tragedy according to four motifs which recur throughout his oeuvre, namely *contingency*, *contemplation*, *compassion*, and *non-closure*, all of which can be understood within the context of a classical Christian theology of God, salvation, and creaturely finitude.

Opsomming

Ek sal in hierdie studie ondersoek instel na die lewensvatbaarheid van 'n tragiese teologie wat terselfdertyd met die kriteria vir 'n klassieke, ortodokse Christelike teologie belyn is. My studie fokus op 'n bepaalde figuur, te wete Rowan Williams, wat, – so argumenteer ek – hierdie twee aspekte op eksemplariese wyse aan die orde stel. Soos uit hierdie studies al blyk, is die begrip 'tragiese teologie' geensins 'n onomstrede saak nie, aangesien sommige juis argumenteer dat dit afwykende beskouinge aangaande God, die skepping, die sonde, ensovoorts, impliseer. My doel in hierdie studie is om die standpunt uit te daag dat 'n klassieke, ortodokse teologie noodwendig teenoor 'n tragiese perspektief gestel moet word. Ek wil juis argumenteer dat 'n tragiese teologie daarna streef om die werklikheid van kontingensie, konflik en lyding ernstig te neem, sonder om in die proses die uitdagings wat dit vir die proses van nadenke en vir die grense van menslike handeling inhou, op te hef. Terselfdertyd word die oortuiging gehuldig dat 'n tragiese teologie' gemaklik met 'n klassieke, ortodoksie teologiese persektief saamval. In die bestudering van Williams se werk, wat grootliks 'n genealogiese benadering volg, wys ek uit hoe Williams hierdie komplekse aspek van tragedie verreken, terwyl hy terselfdertyd aan die fundamentele goedheid van die skepping, asook aan die moontlikheid van transformasie, hoop en heling, vashou. Hierdie oortuiging word binne die kader van 'n inkarnasie-gesentreerde verstaan van die 'verlossing van die tyd' geplaas. Sistematies beskou, sal ek poog om Williams se verstaan van tragedie volgens vier motiewe wat deurlopend in sy werk voorkom, te bespreek. Hierdie vier motiewe is onderskeidelik die motiewe van *kontingensie*, *kontemplasie*, *medelye* en *nie-sluiting* (of voortdurende openheid). Daar word geargumenteer dat al hierdie begrippe binne die konteks van 'n klassieke Christelike teologiese raamwerk aangaande God, redding en eindigheid geplaas kan word.

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In Memory of Gerrit Brand

*'Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst
Das Rettende auch.'*

- Friedrich Hölderlin („Patmos“)

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¹ The reference is to the song entitled 'Going Home', from Cohen's album *Old Ideas*.

*'...The world's mosaic
shattered for centuries in the sand
before my memory.'*

*'...the white line in the tickling
membrane of freedom.'*

— Rowan Williams, 'Augustine' and 'King Lear'

1. Introduction: Tragic Theologies

1.1. The Theme

Our study shall be concerned with essentially one question: is a tragic theology a viable option for an authentically *Christian* theology? This is by no means a straightforward question (as we shall see) because our understanding of 'the tragic' is by no means uniform or seamless. Furthermore, rendering Christian belief and hope into a more tragic vein is by no means uncontroversial in itself. According to a respectable body of theologians and scholars, a tragic vision sits rather uneasily in relation to mainstream orthodox theology. Such scholars, while not denying the reality of tragedy itself, question whether tragedy can have any ultimacy in relation to our soteriological or eschatological reflections. Many of their concerns have some valid grounds: does not Christian theology teach a divine redemption which aims at the reconciliation of all things (Col. 2.20) in which every tear will be wiped away (Rev. 21.4)? How does such a happy end cohere with a tragic vision? Certainly the history of humankind is laced with human suffering, conflict, and disaster, but does not the Christian tradition, in which God's reconciling act in Christ is confessed, point towards a *comedia* and not a collapse into the abyss, or the blindness of Oedipus?

Tragedy has been understood in different ways throughout the history of human culture. As is well-known, its origins, as far as can be discerned, lie in Greek culture (more specifically in Athens of the sixth century BCE)¹. However, as our cultural history shows, tragedy and 'the tragic' generally speaking have been transformed and modified by the cultural and philosophical milieus it has interacted with, resulting in different themes and motifs being exercised.² In the past, it was easier for people to reduce 'tragedy' to a basic idea or 'essence', whether it be the traditional Greek themes of ὄβρις, ἀτη or ἀμαρτία, or the Medieval concept of Fate and Fortune, as well as the idea of a disastrous conclusion to a narrative. Today it is a little more difficult to describe tragedy in accordance with a single theme or underlying conceptual unity. Certainly the themes of human suffering, contingency and conflict remain important, but the manner in which these themes are plotted is by no means uniform. This has not prevented scholars and theologians from articulating antagonistic schemas whereby the Judeo-Christian tradition is deemed to be anti-tragic, and to be ultimately in conflict with the conclusions of tragic inquiry and questioning. When this occurs, as will be argued in this thesis, tragedy is usually being interpreted through a rather Procrustean definition, which is unable to account for the pluriformity of tragic texts and phenomena.

It is my aim in this study to question such a hasty conclusion; I aim to show that an orthodox Christian theology is compatible with a tragic vision. Certainly such a tragic theology would need to be carefully circumscribed and limited, but nonetheless I aim to show that such an enterprise is possible and even desirable. To justify such a conclusion, I will focus my attention on a modern exemplary of

¹ 'Whatever might have happened elsewhere in Greece, whatever analogues (none of them true ones for that matter) may appear in Egypt, Mexico, or Polynesia, tragedy has never come to birth anywhere in the world except in Athens in the sixth century B.C.' The reference for this quote is Gerald F. Else, *The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy*. Martin Classical Lectures XX (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 1.

² We shall justify these statements later in this chapter.

such a circumscribed tragic theology, namely Rowan Williams, widely considered to be an orthodox and classically-orientated thinker.¹ In my estimation (along with many others), Williams is one of the most discerning, learned and penetrating theological thinkers in the world today, one who is able to traverse the complex interrelations of theology, history, philosophy, literature, and poetry with a relative amount of ease. However, Williams is also a profoundly orthodox thinker² who is able to commandeer the resources of the mainstream theological tradition in surprising and provocative ways. In relation to the theme of tragedy, as I will argue, Williams seems to be endorsing four main motifs that recur throughout his oeuvre. These themes will be unpacked throughout the development of this thesis, but I will give a brief summary here so that the reader may have a basic orientation of what is to come.

¹ There are others who could have been studied, but for reasons to be given I have chosen Williams as the subject of this thesis. A survey of other thinkers will be given later in this chapter.

² For some (especially for some conservative evangelical voices within the Anglican Communion), this is a disputed claim. Their suspicion of Williams is tied mainly to his own position on the divisive problem of homosexuality and gay ordination. It is not my intent in this study to enter into this debate (which is fraught with heated emotions on both sides); my contention that Williams is an orthodox thinker stems from the fact (one that is difficult to deny) that Williams' theology remains securely placed within the mainstream of orthodox thinking, which can be seen in his endorsement of a robust Trinitarian theology, the divinity of Christ, the centrality of the cross and resurrection, the virgin birth, the importance of prayer and contemplation, negative theology, original sin, and even the empty tomb. It could be confidently said that (by and large) Williams remains within a conservative Augustinian tradition of thinking. However, this should not imply that Williams is unable to mine the depths of this tradition in new and innovative ways (as has been argued particularly by Jeffrey McCurry). Oliver O' Donovan once described Rowan Williams as a thinker 'who did not think it the business of theology to make Christian faith less offensive to modern man, but rather to expand modern man's imagination to the dimensions of Trinitarian faith'. For this quotation, see Oliver O' Donovan, 'Archbishop Rowan Williams'. *Pro Ecclesia* 12.1 (2003), 5.

It should be mentioned here that for Williams 'orthodoxy' is not about settling with certain credenda, and then sticking with them, no matter what. Primarily, orthodoxy is concerned the category of *holiness*, a particular distinctiveness, in the sense that 'The idea of orthodoxy...is inextricably linked to the idea of holiness. Not (God knows) that right belief makes you holy...But the idea of an orthodox faith makes no sense unless it is about the conditions that make it possible to live a holy life and the criteria by which Christians recognize this or that life as holy' (Williams, 'The Seal of Orthodoxy: Mary and the Heart of Christian Doctrine', in Martin Warner (ed.), *Say Yes to God; Mary and the Revealing of the Word Made Flesh* (London: Tufton, 1999), 15). It is in this sense that doctrine and tradition provide a critical voice in the present, namely, that 'the tradition that is important for theological method is the story of a church thinking and living in confrontation with the primary challenge of God and its classical testimony. This is why tradition can be a critical and renewing factor in theology...a creative recovery of the past in the context of an idle, banal, or corrupt present' (in Williams (with James Atkinson), 'On Doing Theology', in Christina Baxter (ed.), *Stepping Stones: Joint Essays on Anglican Catholic and Evangelical Unity* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987), 10). And furthermore, as he says elsewhere: 'tradition makes thinking possible – an engagement, even a struggle, with what is given, rather than a passive and meaningless observation. Paradoxically, it is only 'orthodoxies' that make us critical, that enable us to ask questions' (Williams, 'What is Catholic Orthodoxy?', in Rowan Williams and Kenneth Leech (eds.), *Essays Catholic and Radical* (London: Bowerdean, 1983), 12). Regarding the language of creeds and specific doctrines, Williams does not seem to suggest that this way of speaking is non-revisable, but rather that what we are concerned with here is the least inadequate way of speaking about God that is available to us. For example, regarding the Nicene Creed, he argues that it provides us with the least 'mythological' way of speaking of God since in it we are not concerned with 'cosmogonic fantasy' or 'speculative dramas' of heavenly individuals, because the incarnation has given us a realistic way of speaking in which 'the history and unsayable resource of the divine act are no longer to be pulled apart' (For these statements, see Williams, 'The Nicene Heritage', in James M. Byrne (ed.), *Christian Understanding of God Today* (Dublin: Columbia, 1993), 45-48). Being patient with the language of traditional Christianity, refusing to give into another idiom too quickly, stems from the belief that 'scriptural and Christian language always says more than it initially seems to say. To believe that you have mastered that 'more' is to arrest a process in which God is actively causing you to grow...to be cautious about hermeneutical or dogmatic closure is not discard or relativise sanctioned words; you occupy the territory marked out by those words, but you will not know where the boundaries are, because the search for definite boundaries suggests that you might be 'in possession' of territory, not yourself included in (possessed by?) it'. (For this quotation, see Williams, 'B.F. Wescott (1825-1901): The Fate of Liberal Anglicanism', in *Anglican Identities* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 2004), 80-81). This means that, for Williams, even though Christianity is entwined with certain ways of speaking, this does not mean that orthodoxy is a finished project: rather 'orthodoxy' should be considered as something 'something still future (to become 'coeval' with the debate at some level); which means that a briskly undialectical rhetoric' today of 'conserving' and 'defending' a clear deposit of faith may come less easily to us...Orthodoxy continues to be made' (in Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (rev. ed, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 24-25), because Christian doctrine and language contains within itself resources for 'self-critique' (cf. Williams, 'Maurice Wiles and Doctrinal Criticism', in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, (ed.) Mike Higton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 275-299), and continues to be 'open to judgement' from its reception in history and in its engagements with non-Christian contexts (cf. 'The Judgement of the World', in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 29-43). And when everything is said and done, the main purpose of dogma is not about formulas but to direct us joyously and in thanksgiving to the transcendent God revealed in Christ. On this, see Williams, 'Creed and Eucharist', in *Gratiarum Actio* (CMZ-Verlag Winrich: Rheinbach, 2004), 34-49 (this was an oratio given on his reception of an honorary doctorate at the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelm-Universität Bonn). For an excellent discussion of this theme generally in Williams' work, see Benjamin Myers, 'Disruptive History: Rowan Williams on Heresy and Orthodoxy', in Matheson Russell (ed.), *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 47-67.

Firstly, Williams believes that tragedy and human suffering are entwined with our habitation of materiality and temporality. Tragedy, for Williams, is not a part of some *absolute* or *ontological* necessity but is rather a part of the *contingent* necessity of living within creaturely time.¹ To live as created beings is to live within the finite plane that is granted us by our dwelling within time and the material order. For Williams, createdness and temporality are good things that should be embraced, that should be seen as part and parcel of God's primordial gifting action (*creatio ex nihilo*), which thereby grounds the goodness of what is created. However, to live as creatures also means to be subject to things that are beyond our control, to forces and dynamics that hinder our action, to suffer the *conflict* of differing rights and goods that often characterise our social interactions. And it is this experience of *contingency* that is the root of tragedy. By grounding tragedy in contingency and created finitude, Williams thereby avoids the problem of an *ultimate* ontological conflict, as critiqued by figures such as David Bentley Hart and John Milbank.

Secondly, in relation to tragedy, Williams adopts a *contemplative* stance in the sense that he refuses to efface the recalcitrant difficulty of the tragic, but rather seeks to allow tragedy to stand out in all its requisite 'objectivity'. Rather than seeking a soothing explanation or resolution to the problem of the tragic phenomena, it will be argued that Williams seeks to emphasise that tragedy cannot be reduced in such a way. Following his teacher Donald MacKinnon, Williams holds to the 'transcendence' of the tragic itself, in the sense that tragedy provides an exemplary case of the reality of the world in its 'over-against-ness' apropos the human ego. Furthermore, Williams (as can be seen in his interaction with T.S. Eliot) aims to expound an understanding of the divine redemption of history that does not move beyond the tragic in some uncomplicated manner. This is because Christian hope for redemption cannot absolve itself from the problem of time and human suffering, without surpassing the temporality of human personhood.

Thirdly, as a result of his attempt to pay resolute attention to the contours of tragedy, Williams' adopts a 'contemplative' or 'poetic' stance in relation to human suffering that leads him to endorse an ethic of *compassion* rather than sheer despair or helplessness in the face of tragedy. He does not ascribe meaning or significance to evil or suffering itself (he strongly resists such a position), but he does not exclude the possibility that suffering may provide an opportunity for personal transformation and resistance against the disorderedness of the world, wrenching meaning from the apparent abyss.

Fourthly, Williams refuses to resolve the problem of suffering, whether it be through theodicy or some kind of eschatological harmonisation. As such, he asserts the tragedy resists *closure* and that it provides us with a continuing *difficulty* for ethical, theoretical, theological, and existential reflection. Of course Williams is a discerning thinker, and so he does not claim that all suffering or tragedy is irredeemable or that healing cannot be found in particular circumstances. Nonetheless, the reality of human suffering on the grand scale on which it has occurred is simply staggering, and the post-Auschwitz experience has made us acutely aware of this fact. Williams refuses to resolve such problems or assert an ultimate closure concerning the immensity of human disaster.² Because of this

¹ I borrow the language of *absolute* or *contingent* necessity from David Tracy. On this, see Tracy, 'On Tragic Wisdom' in Hendrik M. Vroom (ed.), *Wrestling with God and Evil: Philosophical Reflections* (Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2007), 13-24.

² It should be said here that by saying that Williams refuses to completely solve the problem of tragedy or evil, I am not suggesting that Williams endorses an 'obscurantist' or 'magically realist' position whereby the *historical* reasons for human suffering are left unexplained. Such a position has been critiqued by James Wood who has said, apropos magic realism and

lack of ultimate resolution, it seems to follow that the application of the term 'tragic theology' to Williams' oeuvre is not misplaced or a misinterpretation.¹ In Williams' opinion, when we encounter the scale of human suffering, we encounter something like 'a finality of non-resolution' (quoting Paul Janz) which cannot be placed within 'any broader system of explanation.'² As such, tragedy places before us the difficulty of any ultimate resolutions to the problem of time – redemption is possible, but the woundedness potentially remains.

In the following section, I will layout my methodology and the broad argument that will be encompassed therein.

1.2. Research Methodology and Argument

By and large, my thesis is a genealogical and chronological study in which I will trace the outworking of Williams' own appropriation of the tragic awareness which he deems important for any realist understanding of history and God's working within such a history. As such, the problem of time and history play an important part in this inquiry, and will be recurring themes throughout the following chapters. The manner I have decided to compose this text is one centred upon different periods of

the fairy-tale, that 'the terrible is always wrapped in the continuing consolation that the terrible cannot be explained, and that it thus has no connection to our lived world'. For this quote, see James Wood, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), 240. Such a position cannot be equated Williams' own perspective: for example, in relation to September 11, Williams was able to discern the *context* in which such an event occurred, without justifying it or drawing any specific 'meaning' from the tragedy itself. For this, see Williams, *Writing in the Dust: Reflections on 11th September and its Aftermath* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002), 65-81.

¹ It should also be mentioned that by seeking to categorise, and (to a certain extent) to systematize Williams' thought in this area, I am engaging in something Williams himself has not, as of yet, attempted to do. There are several possible reasons for this. However, the one possible reason is that – generally speaking – Williams tends to a little bit suspicious of 'systematic' thinking. This might be a particular 'Anglican' habit of mind (there are no significant Anglican systematic theologians, comparable with the likes of Aquinas, Calvin, Barth, Pannenberg, etc.), which might have something to do with self-conscious attempts of Anglican thinkers to engage matters in a particularist fashion (no doubt stemming from its 'incarnationalist' sensibilities) rather than engaging in the construction of broad 'systems' of thought. But in Williams' case, he himself has explicitly said (in his 'Prologue' *On Christian Theology*) that 'when you try to tidy up an unsystematized speech, you are likely to lose a great deal. What the early church condemned as heresy was commonly a tidy version of its language, in which the losses were judged to severe for comfort' (p. xii-xiii). As can be seen, these sentiments are a result of Williams' investigations of early Christian thought. While Williams does not deny an incipient orthodoxy in early Christian thinking (cf. Williams, 'Does it Make Sense to Speak of a Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?', in Rowan Williams (ed.), *The Making of Orthodoxy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1-23), he is more pluralist in his understanding of Christian origins in sense that he does not want to unify early Christianity in a systematic way since such a 'reduction' might result in 'a diminution of imaginative and affective resource, and a step away from the dense and unavoidable plurality of perception generated by an authentically new moment of insight' (in Williams, 'Baptism and the Arian Controversy', in Michel Barnes and Daniel Williams (eds.) *Arianism after Arius: Essays on the Development of the Fourth-Century Trinitarian Conflict* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 177). Elsewhere, he has said that 'the history of doctrine has the paradoxical character of a repeated effort of definition designed to counter the ill effects of definition itself – rather like the way in which a good poet will struggle to find a fixed form of words that will decisively avoid narrowing and lifeless fixtures and closures of meaning' (in Williams, 'Newman's Arians and the Question of Method in Doctrinal History' in I.T. Ker and Alan G. Hill (eds.), *Newman After a Hundred Years* (New York – Oxford: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1990), 285). However, one could take this further, and say that, fundamentally, this tendency stems from Williams' resolute commitment to the tradition of negative theology, which resists any tidy or stable description of the divine reality, resulting in a continual, patient attention to the difficult 'dialectic' of speaking about God. In relation to Pseudo-Dionysius (regarding the metaphor of light and darkness in his thought), Williams has said 'Christian speech is incurably dialectical. No attempt to resolve it even by supposing that there is a communicable and incommunicable 'part' of God will do. The illumination is *itself* a revelation of the dimensions of inconclusiveness, challenge, and questioning in all talking about what we refer to as God' (in 'Dark Night, Darkness', in Gordon Wakefield (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM 1983), 104). Taking all this into account however, does not deter us from the possibility drawing out a rational and coherent understanding of reality (as can be seen, for example in Williams' studies of Origen). For some of the insights discussed here, I am indebted here to discussions with Christoph Schwöbel, who encouraged me further to 'systematise' Williams' own thinking in this regard, to articulate some 'clarity' within the fragmentation of his dispersed and often contextual writings.

² Paul D. Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire: Reference, Reason and Christian Thinking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 170-174. The context of these quotations is an exposition of Donald MacKinnon's reflections on tragedy. Overall, Janz's provides an excellent study of the philosophical theme of 'reference' in this book, in the sense of the question of what our language and theological reflections 'refer' to, the 'object' of speaking. He seeks to rehabilitate Kant's philosophy in this regard (against other theologians like John Milbank), and argues that tragedy and human suffering, in an exemplary way, provide us with something that cannot be simply the result of interpretation and human construction (in the idealist sense of these terms), but rather place us before a 'finality' of some kind, which cannot be explained away.

Williams' own theological development. Rather than developing each of the four motifs separately (*contingency*, *contemplation*, *compassion* and *non-closure*), I have decided to analyse texts in chronological sequence (moving from earlier texts to later texts as the chapters progress), focusing on those themes that are important for this study, showing thereby how the various themes are accented or developed in his maturing thought. The benefits for following such a method are tied to the nature of the texts and the related motifs themselves. Since these motifs are intertwined together (with some motifs being emphasised more in some periods in comparison with other texts), it seems to be artificial and unnecessarily atomistic to separate them from one another. Where these motifs are developed and emphasised together, I have expounded them together, rather than parsing them into individual chapters. As will be seen, a further advantage of this method is that it avoids unneeded repetition of texts; this means that by and large once I have completed an exposition of a particular text, I will not need to return to it again. I will not need to repeat quotations, or to re-contextualise each statement again and again. As a result, the flow of the argument will be easier to follow and the traces of development more apparent. Furthermore, it avoids the problem of equal treatment of each motif. As we progress in this study, it will become apparent Williams' deals with some motifs in a more in-depth manner than other themes. For example, the themes of *compassion* and *non-closure* are not given as much space as the other motifs of *contingency* and *contemplation* because they are not as prominent or as pronounced in Williams' writings. This should not imply that their level of importance is degraded, only that in the available texts in which Williams deals with themes of suffering and tragedy, the motifs of *contemplation* and *contingency* are more apparent than the others.

So it is for these reasons that I have chosen this particular method of investigation and study, in the hope that it provides the reader with a more linear argument, one that is easier to follow, and in which chronological development and expository clarity remain intact. The only exceptions to this method are to be found in the first two chapters of this thesis, the first being an introductory chapter, and the second which provides a theological presupposition for the developing thesis, namely Williams' understanding of creation, time and human sinfulness.

The outline of my central arguments can be given here, even though clarity requires a more detailed exposition. It should be said that the chapters of my thesis, generally speaking, are not structured like a deductive argument (one proposition built upon another in part of a wider argument), but should be seen as a presentation of Williams developing thought on the theme of tragedy, with various potential criticisms and problems addressed along the way, rather than an argument building to a climax. However, it seems prudent to lay out the basic argument of this thesis here, so that the reader may have a conceptual and theological orientation for this study. The argument roughly goes as follows:

1. Theology in general (and systematic theology in particular) are concerned with relating Christian thought and rationality to reality as it presents itself. Since theology is determined to understand the world as something created and fundamentally rational (because it is patterned after the creative *logos* or *ratio* of the God who is confessed within the Judeo-Christian tradition), we attempt to understand the world as something that is not ontologically chaotic but rather

something that is rational and ordered, despite all the apparent confusion that presents itself to us, thereby relating the created world to its divine *raison d'être*.¹ In the words of Thomas Aquinas: 'in sacred science, *all things* [my italics] are treated of under the aspect of God: either because they are God Himself [sic] or because they refer to God as their beginning and end.'² But since theology is concerned with the world, as understood within the matrix of Christian belief, thought and praxis, the horizon of potential reflection is the 'totality' of the world as it presents itself. As such there is no part of reality that can be excluded *a priori* from the realm of Christian thought and reflection. It follows from this that it cannot be the task of Christian theology to cordon off legitimate areas of study from rational investigation. Rather than being the product of orthodox Christian thinking, it is a touchstone of heretical thought to divide the world up into such a dualistic manner (e.g. to separate God the Creator from God the Redeemer, as we find in early Gnostic and Marcionite thought), rather than finding an ontic rationale to the created world, as held by orthodox Christian thinking.³ In other words, Christian theology is concerned with the question of *truth*⁴ and is entwined with a permanent continuation of dialogue that is part of the hermeneutical process of coming-to-understand.⁵ As such, systematic theology is concerned with the dual purpose of retrieving its own identity in the *historical-hermeneutical* task of reflection on its own traditional texts in light of where it is *now*, and with the *systematic-analytic* task of relating its truth-claims to the wider world of discourse and rival truth-claims.⁶ Or in another idiom, systematic theology is concerned with *constructive* task (interpretation) and a *reconstructive* task (communication).⁷ Such a constructive-reconstructive task, from a systematic perspective, is based on fundamental beliefs (e.g. Trinity, creation, atonement) which orientate and shape its 'world' (*Welt*), and also thereby the 'context' (*Umwelt*) in which it articulates itself. There is no construction of a 'world' without a 'context' being articulated at the same time. As such, there is a sense in which systems of thought can be considered as 'self-referential', while at the same time not being deemed 'auto-poetic'.⁸

¹ John Webster, 'Principles of Systematic Theology'. *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11.1 (2009), 56-71. It should be said here in passing that it could be argued, from these principles, that such a vision lies at the foundation of the our understanding of education in general, as well as the idea of the university itself. For this, see Williams, 'Faith in the University', in Simon Robinson and Clement Katulushi (eds.), *Values in Higher Education* (Glamorgan: Aureus Publishing / University of Leeds), 24-35.

² *Summa Theologiae* I. Q. 1. Art. 7, ad. 1.

³ For more on this, cf. Rowan Williams, 'Origen: Between Orthodoxy and Heresy' in Walther Bienert and Uwe Kühneweg (eds.) *Origenia Septima: Origenes in den Auseinandersetzungen des 4. Jahrhunderts* (Louvain: Peeters, 1999), 3-14; Rowan Williams 'Defining Heresy', in Alan Kreider (ed.), *The Origins of Christendom in the West* (Edinburgh-New York: T & T Clark, 2001), 313-335.

⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology I*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI, 1991), 1-61.

⁵ Ingolf U. Dalferth, 'Beyond Understanding? Transcending Our Limits and the Limits of Our Understanding', in (eds.) Arne Grøn, Iben Damgaard, Søren Overgaard, *Subjectivity and Transcendence* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 37-54.

⁶ Christoph Schwöbel, *God: Action and Revelation* (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1992), 12-22.

⁷ Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Theology and Philosophy* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1988), chap. 12. In Rowan Williams' own parlance, he would relate *celebratory* and *critical* aspects of theology with the hermeneutical task, and the *communicative* with the church's interaction with the world. For more on this, see Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 'Prologue', xii-xvi. It should be said obviously that there is not simple division between the *constructive* (what a text *meant*) and the *reconstructive* (what a text *means*), since they are involved in a dialogical process of mutual explication. For some great reflections on this, Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), especially the essays entitled 'Performing the Scriptures', 'What Authority Has Our Past?' and 'What Might Martyrdom Mean?' where he deals with these kinds of questions.

⁸ For some more discussion of this, drawing heavily on the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann, see Michael Murrmann-Kahl, 'Mysterium Trinitatis'?, *Fallstudien zur Trinitätslehre in der evangelischen Dogmatik des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin-New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1997), 1-16.

2. As a result of this preceding consideration, it should be said that a perennial risk of such a systematic enterprise is that it can become absolutized or static, presuming to be immune from the contingency of all our human constructive and reconstructive practices. Such an attitude (whether it be apparent or inchoate, thematised or unthematized) is inherently ideological¹, the result of the sinful desire to assert mastery and control over the world.² It is precisely here that the problem of tragedy and human suffering asserts itself because it resists the desire for totalization and control which seems to bypass the reality of limitations in its drive for a systematization of 'the whole'. The experience of human suffering and the tragic in the world provides an example of such a limitation. The tendency to absolutize is by no means the exclusive prerogative of the Christian church (in some of its manifestations throughout history) but also secularist society³ and neo-liberal forms of democracy in which control and violence remain a constant possibility.⁴ Tragedy and human suffering, both in its literary and historical manifestations, provide for us in an exemplary manner the way that the world resists tidy or resolved description. It articulates a problem for thought and ethical reflection.⁵ And yet, since the project of systematic theology is (as argued above) thought to provide some order and truth-coherency to the world, as refracted through Christian reflection and theology, we cannot leave the reality of suffering or tragedy outside of our purview (without reducing ourselves to a dualistic viewpoint rejected by orthodox theology). As such, it remains a problem for thought.
3. How is this problem solved? There is no general answer to this question since there are differing responses to this problem. However, one could classify the responses into three broad categories, while bearing in mind that any categorisation has the tendency to smooth over differences in order to establish a basic perspective. Nonetheless, three broad responses are possible; I have called them: the tragic response, the anti-tragic response, and the post-tragic response⁶. I shall discuss each briefly under the categories of *theology as tragic or paradoxically tragic*, *theology as anti-tragic or non-tragic*, and *theology as partially tragic or post-tragic*.

(i) *Theology as tragic or paradoxically tragic*

The first option does not seek to resolve the problem of the tragedy, but rather seeks to leave it as a problem for Christian thought and reflection. Central to this perspective is the idea that

¹ For Williams' reflections on theological ideology, see 'Theological Integrity', in *On Christian Theology*, 3-15.

² On this, see Sarah Coakley, 'Is there a Future for Gender and Theology? On Gender, Contemplation, and the Systematic Task'. *Criterion* 47.1 (2009), 2-11. For a more detailed treatment, see Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 33-65.

³ This is the argument of John Milbank in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (2nd ed, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), but it has also been advanced by Rowan Williams. For this, see Williams, 'Has Secularism Failed?', in *Faith in the Public Square* (London, Bloomsbury: 2012), 11-22 where he argues that the functionalism and managerialism of 'programmatically' secularism is unable to make sense of the tragic, with that which resists technological reduction or elimination.

⁴ Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁵ Such a position will be argued further when we engage in a definition of tragedy, and when we survey the relation between theology and tragedy in this chapter and what is to follow. However, for a sample of such an argument by an important contributor on this theme, see Donald MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 122-135.

⁶ I draw the language of 'partially tragic', 'paradoxically tragic' and 'anti-tragic' from the work of Graham Ward. For more on this, Ward, 'Tragedy as Subclause: George Steiner's Dialogue with Donald MacKinnon'. *Heythrop Journal* 34 (1993), 274-287. I have however adapted these designations slightly for my own purposes.

suffering cannot be completely explained, and that tragedy and human disaster should not be placed within a framework into which it is dissolved. As such, these theologians are opposed to the project of theoretical theodicy in its various manifestations. Of the theologians and thinkers who expound this perspective, there is a wide range of divergence, between those who are more radical in their emphasis and those who are a little more nuanced in their perspective. Bearing in mind these differences, some of those who expound this viewpoint include figures such as: Donald MacKinnon, Paul Tillich, Nicholas Lash, Dietrich Ritschl, Paul Janz, Kathleen Sands, Flora Keshgegian, Kenneth Surin, David Toole, Larry Bouchard, Wendy Farley, Jürgen Moltmann, Johann Baptist Metz, Graham Ward and Rowan Williams.

(ii) *Theology as anti-tragic or non-tragic*

Regarding the second option, here we have an espousal of an anti-tragic consciousness which refuses to give little place to tragedy within orthodox theological reflection. One could place the early George Steiner within this 'anti-tragic' interpretation of the Judeo-Christian faith on a prima facie reading (though things are not as simple when one examines him in detail). His basic intention, at least in *The Death of Tragedy*, is that the Judeo-Christian helped to bring about this death because its fundamental myths and themes were at odds with tragedy (e.g. its theology of redemption). Similar contentions were held by the literary critics Laurence Michel¹ and D.D. Raphael², as well as the philosopher Karl Jaspers (who said 'Der glaubende Christ anerkennt keine eigentliche Tragik mehr'³). Another 'anti-tragic perspective' is propounded by David Bentley Hart, who emphasises quite strongly that tragedy is little place within Christian theological reflection. He rejects out of hand any kind of 'tragic theology'.⁴ On this view, tragedy (especially in its Attic manifestations) is opposed to the Christian vision of redemption. The emphasis on tragic necessity, death, and scapegoating all imply a particular theological and socio-political perspective that is ultimately conservative and is unable to take account of the radical newness that is revealed in the resurrection. Against the background of Greek tragedy, tragic sacrifice is something that does not bring about change, but rather serves as a kind of release valve in which the splenetic and thymotic whims of society are given a place to vent (namely the scapegoat). However, such a mechanism is simply an antic of the current order, one that is used to maintain the status quo. Furthermore, Hart rejects 'tragic theology' because he believes it involves the metaphysical necessity of evil, and as such comes into conflict with orthodox Christian teaching.

¹ Laurence Michel, 'Die Möglichkeit einer christlichen Tragödie', in Volkmar Sander (ed.), *Tragik und Tragödie. Wege der Forschung*, Band 108 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971), 177-208. This is a German translation of an originally English essay.

² D.D. Raphael, *The Paradox of Tragedy* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1960), 37-69.

³ Karl Jaspers, *Über das Tragische* (München: R. Piper & Vo Verlag, 1952), 9-10, 48-49. The quotation is on p. 48.

⁴ Hart's rejection of tragic theology will be sketched in more detail later. However, for a short précis of his arguments, see David Bentley Hart, 'Response from David Bentley Hart to McGuckin and Murphy', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60.1 (2007), 95-101.

(iii) *Theology as post-tragic or partially tragic*

The third perspective is a bit more difficult to categorise since it includes a much wider area of Christian thinkers. It concerns those who are able or willing to give the tragic a place within theological reflection, but believe nonetheless that Christian hope moves beyond tragedy, to a more tragicomic vision whereby tragedy and human suffering are either justified or overcome eschatologically. The spectrum of those who hold this view is wide, and includes those who endorse some kind of theodicy, and those who do not. They include: Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, John Milbank, amongst many others.

Taking into account these broad perspectives, there obviously are thinkers who are not so easy to classify, either because they do not ultimately decide for a tragic or post-tragic perspective, or because they make use of tragic and theological themes but are not concerned with other traditional themes of Christian theology (e.g. Terry Eagleton, Walter Benjamin). Nonetheless, I believe that the broad categories I have used here are a helpful heuristic for orientating ourselves as we continue in our study of this theme.

4. Moving onto our next point, it is my purpose in this study to advocate a modest and circumscribed tragic theology, following the contours suggested by Rowan Williams' theology. The reason I have opted for a more tragic theology (rather than post-tragic) is for the following reasons:

- (i) Tragic theology allows us to take the problem of suffering as seriously as possible, along with the various aporias it creates. Rather than dissolving or harmonizing the problem of human disaster and suffering¹, tragic theology allows us to be more agnostic about the final outcome, while making allowance for redemption, exposing us to the truth of reality in all its resistance to tidy description, and emphasising the practice of empathy with those who suffer. It allows for loss and woundedness to remain, even though healing always remains a possibility. It has difficulties with the consolations and generalisations of various theodicies. Furthermore, tragic theology provides us with resources for doing systematic theology within a postmodern context, where absolutisation and resolution remain problematic prospects, since it presents us with resolute difficulties that cannot be systematized. On the other hand, however, tragedy also provides us with something that resists being explained away as something simply that is the result of interpretation or construction (like some radical poststructuralist theory implies), because to do so would imply a moral failure of a particularly brutal kind, in which suffering would just be a matter of sheer 'perspective'. As such, tragedy can be understood as an occurrence of 'the real'² precisely because it provides an objective 'referent' for thought, thereby opening a path to reason and discernment.

¹ In relation to the vision of tragedy, Richard Sewall writes that tragedy is 'not for those who cannot live with unsolved questions or unresolved doubts, whose bent of mind would reduce the fact of evil into something else or resolve into some larger whole'. For this quote, see Richard W. Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy* (new ed., New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1980), 5.

² I am using the term 'the real' here in a different sense to the Lacanian sense of its use, though it finds comparison in the fact that both assert a resilient 'thereness' of the real (though the nature of that 'thereness' is by no means agreed upon). For example, Slavoj Žižek asserts that 'The Real is thus the disavowed X on account of which our vision of reality is anamorphically

- (ii) Tragic theology is not opposed to an authentic *Christian* theology. As will be argued (against figures like David Bentley Hart), tragedy cannot be reduced to one homogenous dynamic, nor can it be easily essentialised (as Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton have argued). Furthermore, I will argue that it is possible to endorse an orthodox Christian theology, while at the same time holding onto an incarnationally-centred perspective that is able to embrace a tragic consciousness simultaneously.
- (iii) By focusing on Rowan Williams, who holds a circumscribed and discerning theology of the tragic, we are able to navigate through some of criticisms lodged against tragic theology. By emphasizing the motif of *contingency*, and the tragic *conflict* implied by dwelling within the boundaries of time, we are able to avoid the problem of a tragic ontology (as advocated by figures like Kathleen Sands), whereby violence, diremption and conflict are given a fundamental status in the heart of being. For Williams, the heart of being is the Triune God, a being of infinite difference and otherness, of knowledge and love, of desire and deferral, which gives place for created being. However, being a created being involves entanglement in finitude and temporality, and it is this that is the source of tragic experience. Furthermore, by emphasizing the motifs of *contemplation* and *non-closure* Williams is able to take the problem of history and particularity seriously, and does not aim to provide easy resolutions to the problem of suffering. And lastly, by emphasizing *compassion*, Williams does not endorse hopelessness or resignation before the powers of Fate, but seeks to advance a contemplative and *compassionate* practice that opens the way for transformation, healing, and even a poetic creativity, which as such provide us with avenues for meaningful resistance and protest against the disorderedness of the world.
5. The question still remains regarding how this particular study shall progress, and how it will be structured. Below, I will give a summary of how the chapters contained herein shall progress and develop:
- I will begin in this first chapter by seeking to briefly adumbrate a definition of tragedy, in conversation with some modern philosophical attempts to understand it as an art-form and as a historical experience. Thereafter, I will engage in a survey of how modern theology has appropriated the tragic, thereby creating a background and perspective into which I will place Williams as a thinker.
- In the second chapter, I will place Williams' discussion of tragedy within the context of his understanding of creation, time, and human sinfulness. I aim to show that Williams' understands

distorted; it is simultaneously the Thing to which direct access is not possible and the obstacle which prevents this direct access, the Thing which eludes our grasp and the distorting screen which makes us miss the Thing'. For this quote, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2006), 26. It can also be mentioned here that speculative realists like Quentin Meillassoux have also sought to return to a non-naïve account of 'objectivism' by asserting that it is 'contingency, 'the capacity to be otherwise', or 'chaos' itself that provides a real referent for thought, thereby moving outside the paradigm of Kantian phenomenalism. For Meillassoux's arguments, see Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London-New York: Continuum, 2008). Exegetically, he has applied such a perspective to the poetry of Mallarmé in *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's Coup de Dés*, trans Robin Mackay (Falmouth-New York: Sequence / Urbanomic, 2012) where he argues that Mallarmé attempted to articulate the infinitude of chance and 'the capacity to be otherwise' through a code hidden in the text, revealed in hints in the poem, but not clear enough to be decisive either way. It should be said here that my use of the term 'objectivity' will follow the more theological use of the term as given to it by Paul Janz.

our tragic disorderedness to be based upon our existence as finite and bounded beings. In addition to this, however, I will also aim to emphasise the fact that matter and temporality are not things to be shunned, but rather that they are manifestations of something beautiful and something to be embraced. Such a perspective needs to be remembered as we encounter the rather stark theme of tragedy as it occurs in the remainder of this thesis. Further, I will argue that since Williams wholeheartedly embraces the traditional doctrine of *privatio boni*, his understanding of tragedy should not be predicated upon a theory of 'radical evil' or ontological violence.

The third chapter will be centred around Williams' lectures on T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. To contextualise these lectures, I will deal with the influence of Donald MacKinnon on Williams' thought, as well as dealing with an early essay of Williams on the Spirit and eschatology that provides our first glimpse into Williams' reflections on the theme of tragedy. My treatment of Williams' lectures on *Quartets* is (to the best of my knowledge) the most in-depth treatment of these texts (which as of yet remain unpublished). I will argue that Williams' encounter with the 'tragic realism'¹ of Eliot's vision (which Williams argues is founded upon a theology of the incarnation), reinforced within Williams' mind the problem of the redemption of time, and all the tragic contingency it implies. Rather than seeking to move beyond the tragic contours of time, Williams argued that an authentic Christian doctrine of the incarnation gives us the resources for taking the reality of time and tragedy seriously. A Christian hope which aims to avoid 'the world of speculation' (Eliot) and fantasy has to take the problem of meaningless suffering seriously. Redemption can only be glimpsed when we see what is truly *there*, not seeking to explain it away. As such, hope and meaning are not something beyond possibility, but we need to remain vigilant against the tendency to resolve the *difficulty* that suffering and tragedy propose.

The fourth chapter will seek to develop these themes a little further to show how the insights gained through Williams' reading of the *Quartets* influenced his later theology. By examining some texts and sermons, we will show that Williams' emphasis on taking the tragic seriously (without dissolving it or explaining it away) is tied to his growing emphasis on the problem of fantasy, mainly in its attempts to secure the ego within the flux of contingency and finitude. The reason for this growing emphasis (which is there earlier, but becomes more pronounced latter) seems to be the result of Williams' engagement with the critique of religion we find in Freud. In this context, suffering, tragedy and the experience of the 'dark night' act as a bulwark against the ego's attempts to create a tidy description of the world, one that ultimately mirrors the ego itself.

The following chapter will deal with Williams' most sustained engagement with the thought of his teacher Donald MacKinnon. This provides us with a very important text for understanding Williams' thoughts on the relation between the doctrine of the Trinity, tragedy, and contingency. Also in this chapter, I will deal with Williams' response to the question of theodicy. It will not be main aim to develop or study in detail this problem (a problem which is fraught with controversy and dissenting opinions). Rather I shall deal with Williams' response to the theodicy proposed by

¹ For a discussion of this term, see John Orr, *Tragic Realism and Modern Society: Studies in the Sociology of the Modern Novel* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1977). The origin of the term stems from Erich Auerbach; on this, see *ibid.*, 3-15.

the analytic philosopher and theologian Marilyn McCord Adams. I aim to show that Williams rejects Adams' 'aesthetic' approach to the problem of evil, and faults her for proposing a general solution to the problem of evil which does not allow for the *particularity* of *human* meaning-making within the context of suffering - even 'horrendous' suffering. After discussing this theme, I will deal with some miscellaneous texts in which the problem of time and tragedy are dealt with in some of Williams' later texts. These later reflections will confirm what we have been arguing up to this point, namely that tragedy is entwined with the problem of time. This chapter will also contain a section in which I seek to respond to a possible interpretation of Williams' theology of the Trinity. It is possible that Williams' understanding of divine desire could acquire tragic overtones if taken too far. However, it will be shown that we cannot take Williams thought in this direction without creating serious problems with what he says elsewhere. I will show that as we examine the various texts in which Williams deals with the theme of the Trinity, we can see that his thoughts on this topic allows for an infinite deferral of desire and openness that grounds the ontological possibility of finite being. Such a perspective implies a non-closure and openness within the Triune being. But this should not be understood as an attempt to read 'tragedy' back into the divine life.

I will end this thesis with a conclusion, summarising the findings of this study, while at the same time proposing some avenues for future study and reflections. I will also respond to some further objections that might be made against Williams' theology on this matter.

The points above more or less summarise the argument and structure of the following study. The following section will deal with the problem of defining tragedy (in relation to philosophy), thereafter followed by a survey of how various theologians and thinkers have related the tragedy to theological questions.

1.3 Tragedy: In Search of a Definition

When it comes to advocating a modest plea for a tragic theology (the kind I will expound in relation to Rowan Williams), a lot hangs on the definition of 'tragedy' and 'the tragic'.¹ As will be readily admitted, there are certain understandings of 'tragedy' and 'the tragic' which are difficult to reconcile with an authentic *Christian* theology. However, as modern scholarship regarding 'tragedy' tells us, a simple definition of tragedy is difficult to come by. It is harder today to reduce 'tragedy' in its myriad manifestations to a single dynamic or to one over-arching mythological backdrop (whether this be pagan, religious or non-religious). Certainly there are several recurring 'traditional' themes within the genre of 'tragedy' but these themes are by no means necessarily always present in particular tragic

¹ It should be mentioned here that – generally speaking – discourse surrounding 'the tragic' is largely a modern affair. The Greeks did sometimes use 'the tragic' as a general term to describe certain forms of heightened speech or actions, but by and large the 'universalizing' use of the term 'the tragic' is one which we inherit from post-Kantian German Idealism (Schlegel, Schelling, Hegel, Hölderlin, etc.). On this, see Simon Goldhill, *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 137-165. Also, cf. the comments of Peter Szondi when he says 'Seit Aristoteles gibt es eine Poetik der Tragödie, sei Schelling erst eine Philosophie des Tragischen. Als Unterweisung im Dichten will die Schrift des Aristoteles die Elemente der Tragischen Kunst bestimmen; ihr Gegenstand ist die Tragödie, nicht deren Idee.' For this quote, see Peter Szondi, *Versuch über das Tragische* (Frankfurt am Main: Im Insel-Verlag, 1961), 7. However, for a slightly different perspective, see Miriam Leonard, 'Tragedy and the Seductions of Philosophy'. *The Cambridge Classical Journal* (2012) 58, 145–164.

narratives, nor do tragic narratives conform to one formulaic system of presentation (a tendency prominent since Aristotle's *Poetics*).¹

It cannot be denied that tragedy, in its primary manifestation, is a phenomenon of Greek antiquity. Its exact origins remain mysterious, as can be seen when we examine the word 'tragedy' itself. The exact etymology of the word (τραγωδία) is difficult to trace, but its exact meaning has been translated as 'goat-song' or 'goat-singer', which implies (as some have argued) that it most likely has its origins within a Dionysian cultic or ritual context of dithyrambic worship, though the exact relation between this and actual literary forms of 'tragedy' still is debated.² Other suggestions include the idea that the dramatic form of tragedy stems from the Greek poet-actor Thespis (via Solon and eventually Aeschylus) who created it as a new art-form in the City of Dionysia during the civic festival, circa 534 BCE, under the patronage of Peisistratus. The 'goat' might have been a prize for the winner of the dramatic competition which was held in the city.³ Others trace the connection the figure of 'the goat' to the tragic figure of the scapegoat who in Attic tragedy is sacrificed for the sake of socio-political catharsis.⁴ Nonetheless, despite its mysterious origins, tragedy is believed and interpreted by many to be primarily a Greek phenomenon, with other 'tragedies' being analogous to this primary experience. Paul Ricoeur writes that 'Greek tragedy is not at all an example in the inductive sense, but the sudden and complete manifestation of the essence of the tragic; to understand the tragic is to relive in oneself the Greek experience of the tragic, not as a particular case of tragedy, but as the origin of tragedy...it is by grasping its essence in its Greek phenomenon that we can understand tragedy as analogous to Greek tragedy.'⁵ Ricoeur goes on to describe this essence of Greek tragedy by examining several of the recurring words and themes related to it, namely ὕβρις (pride), ἀτή (delusion or blindness), ἀμαρτία (fault), μοίρα (fate), φθόνος (divine jealousy), φόβος (fear), and the κακός δαίμων (the wicked god).⁶ For Ricoeur, the central theme of tragedy is the conflict between 'the wicked god' and the tragic hero, who achieves greatness by resisting the evil powers that enforce themselves upon the heroic figure. As Ricoeur argues, we do not have tragedy until 'the theme of predestination to evil...comes up against the theme of heroic greatness'.⁷ When we have the rebellious figure asserting their freedom against the powers of necessity, we encounter the essence of tragic experience. He goes on to argue later that deliverance from the tragic experience is to be found in the very experience of tragedy as *spectacle*, namely as the process whereby the representation of tragedy is

¹ For Aristotle's views, see particularly *Poetics* 1449b22ff, in Jonathan Barnes (ed.) *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984).

² This is a widely accepted interpretation (but not uncontested); for a sample of this, see Adrian Poole, *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3-19; Walter Sparr, 'Tragödie I', in Gerhard Müller (ed.), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*. Band 33 (Berlin-New York: Walter De Gruyter, 2002), 751.

³ Gerald F. Else, *The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy*; Richard E. Sturm, 'The Ancient Origin and Sense of Tragedy', in Pink Dandelion, Douglas Gwyn, Rachel Muers, Brian Phillips, and Richard Sturm, *Towards Tragedy / Reclaiming Hope: Literature, Theology and Sociology in Conversation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 1-9. The political dimension of ancient tragedy should not be overlooked since the productions of the various Greek tragedies were something funded precisely by the *polis*, and the generalizing use of 'the tragic' by German Idealists also betrays a particularly political motivation as well. On this, see Goldhill, *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy*, 152-164.

⁴ For an example of this, see Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003). Eagleton traces this motif up to the contemporary understanding of 'the tragic', but he surprisingly seems to re-interpret the theme of 'the scapegoat' in a distinctly leftist, Marxist and even Pauline fashion whereby 'the scapegoats' are not a legitimization of the contemporary status quo (as we find David Bentley Hart's interpretation of Attic tragedy), but rather 'the excremental remainder' (to quote Slavoj Žižek) thereby pointing to the *limitations* of the present order of things, rather than the *legitimation* of it. In this interpretation, society should be judged on what it *excludes* from its definition, rather than what it *includes*.

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 211.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 213-226.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 218.

aimed to invoke *sympathy* within its audience, namely through the 'chorus' in which the audience is enabled to experience the pain of the tragic hero through poetic lyricism of the spectacle.¹

Regarding this interpretation of Greek tragedy, one might quibble regarding details, but this nonetheless seems to be a relatively accurate portrayal of the Greek understanding of the tragic. What is questionable however in Ricoeur's interpretation above is his assertion that every truly 'tragic' narrative is 'analogous' with Greek tragedy. Raymond Williams, regarding the history of interpretation of tragedy, argues that not only was the ancient Greek view not 'systematised' but also that it is worth asking the question whether the tradition of tragic interpretation 'carries so clear and single a meaning?'² Clearly there are similarities between Hellenistic tragedy and the tradition that developed after it (the theme of conflict between 'freedom' and 'necessity' remain important touchstones, for example); however, what Raymond Williams shows is that as the tradition develops, a tidy description becomes more and more complex.³ He writes that 'Tragedy is then not a single and permanent kind of fact, but a series of experiences and conventions and institutions. It is not a case of interpreting this series by reference to a permanent and unchanging human nature. Rather, the varieties of tragic experience are to be interpreted by reference to the changing reference of institutions. The universalist character of most tragic theory is then the opposite pole from our necessary interest.'⁴

Terry Eagleton continues within the tradition of Raymond Williams (whom he studied under) in his more recent study of the same theme, entitled *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2003). Eagleton's book is a rigorous and rather dense response to the so-called 'death of tragedy school', most ably defended by the literary critic George Steiner in his book *The Death of Tragedy* (1961). Steiner's central thesis (which is by no means straightforward)⁵ is that tragedy as a literary form is no longer possible within our modern context. For Steiner this is not necessarily a good thing, but is nonetheless tied to several factors, namely the legacy of Judeo-Christianity, Marxism, the rise of the prose novel, amongst other factors. One of Steiner's central arguments in this book is that the Judeo-Christian tradition is inimical to tragedy ('Tragedy is alien to the Judaic sense of the world'⁶), and that therefore it has been one of the contributing factors to a decline in the tragic art-form.⁷ His main argument for regarding the Judeo-Christian tradition as being anti-tragic lies mainly in its

¹ Ibid., 227-231.

² Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Stanford; California: Stanford University Press, 1966), 14.

³ Ibid., 17-45. It should be said here that some have criticised Raymond Williams himself for narrowing the tragic tradition so that it tends to take on a more secular and revolutionary meaning. On this, Walter Stein, 'Humanism and Tragic Redemption'. *New Blackfriars* 48.561 (1967), 230-244.

⁴ Ibid., 45-46.

⁵ The contradictions and ambiguities of Steiner's work in this regard are discussed by Graham Ward in 'Tragedy as Subclause'. For an example of Steiner's own development in relation to the theme of tragedy, see George Steiner, 'Absolute Tragedy', in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 129-141.

⁶ *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), 4. It should be said here that Steiner's sentiments are by no means isolated. Alain Badiou has echoed similar sentiments when he said (in 1990) that 'For the moment, there exists no modern tragedy' mainly due to the democratic climate of contemporary society. For Badiou, the tragic hero is one who chooses truth, at the expense of meaning and socially-consented lawfulness. For this, see Alain Badiou, *Rhapsody for the Theatre*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London-New York: Verso, 2013), 86. This opinion that there is no such thing as 'modern tragedy' goes back to Hegel who spoke of the death of real art in the modern period. Such sentiments were later echoed by Heidegger. For more on this, see Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 207-234.

⁷ Steiner's argument lacks a significant amount of clarity here because while, on the one hand, he argues that the death of tragedy in the modern period is in some sense dependent upon the legacy of the Judeo-Christian tradition (because he believes such a tradition to be by and large 'anti-tragic'), he also argues that the death of tragedy has resulted in a loss of an important contribution made by the Judeo-Christian tradition itself, namely tragedy as an art-form. The ambiguities in argumentation here are clear, as Graham Ward has shown. For a similar 'ambiguous' argument regarding the relation of Christianity to tragedy, see Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy*, 50-56, a book that is roughly contemporary with Steiner's book (1959), republished with new content in 1980.

understanding of salvation and its eschatology, which are compensatory and just, whereas the tragic art-form must 'start from the fact of catastrophe. Tragedies end badly...Job¹ gets back double the number of she-asses; so he should, for God has enacted upon him the parable of justice. Oedipus does not get back his eyes or his sceptre over Thebes.' For Steiner, 'Tragedy is irreparable. It cannot lead to just and material compensation for past suffering.' He goes on to say that 'Tragic drama tells us that the spheres of reason, order and justice are terribly limited and that no progress in our science or technical resources will enlarge their relevance. Outside and within man is *l'autre*, the 'otherness' of the world. Call it what you will: hidden or malevolent God, blind fate, the solicitations of hell, or the brute fury of our animal blood. It waits for us in ambush at the crossroads. It mocks us and destroys us. In certain rare instances, it leads us after destruction to some incomprehensible repose.'²

Whatever the validity of some of Steiner's insights, Eagleton seeks to problematize Steiner's reductive approach to tragedy as well as Marxism and Judeo-Christianity.³ Eagleton's book as a whole (but particularly the first chapter) aims to debunk any reductive account regarding tragedy as a literary form or an existential event.⁴ He even wonders whether 'tragedy' might not be exchangeable with something like 'very sad' without being more descriptive than that. He writes 'The truth is that no definition of tragedy more elaborate than 'very sad' has ever worked.'⁵ He critiques Paul Ricoeur for what he regards as 'essentialism', especially in regard to his privileging of Greek tragic themes. Referring to Steiner's work in particular he says, 'It is...a mistake to believe with George Steiner that Christianity is inherently anti-tragic. Steiner makes the same mistake about Marxism, for much the same reasons. Because these are both ultimately hopeful world-views they can have no truck with the tragic, which for Steiner is all about ill-starred endings.'⁶ Speaking in relation to the death of Christ, Eagleton says that 'Jesus's crucifixion is genuinely tragic' and further that 'If his death was a mere device for rising again in glory, a kind of *reculer pour mieux sauter*, then it was no more than a cheap conjuring trick. It was because his death seemed to him a cul-de-sac, as his despairing scriptural quotation on the cross would suggest, that it could be fruitful...The truth is that Jesus was a miserable failure, and his probable expectation that he would return to earth in the lifetime of his followers seems to have been a little too optimistic.' However Eagleton goes on to say that 'only by accepting the worst for what it is, not as a convenient springboard for leaping beyond it, can one hope to surpass it. Only by accepting this as the last word about the human condition can it cease to be the last word. Jesus was left only with a forlorn faith in what he called his Father, despite the fact that this power seemed now to have abandoned him...The destitute condition of humanity, if it was to be fully restored, had to be lived all the way through, pressed to the extreme limit of a descent into the hell of meaninglessness and desolation, rather than disavowed, patched up or short-circuited. Only by being

¹ It can be mentioned here in passing that Richard Sewall's puts the book of Job at the beginning of his literary study of the tragic vision, even before the Greek tragedians. For this, see Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy*, 9-24.

² *The Death of Tragedy*, 8-9.

³ For more on Eagleton, Steiner and 'the tragic' in relation to Christian theology, see Graham Ward, 'Steiner and Eagleton: The Practice of Hope and the Idea of the Tragic'. *Literature & Theology* 19.2 (2005), 100-111.

⁴ *Sweet Violence*, 1-22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

'made sin' in the Pauline phrase, turned into some monstrous, outcast symbol of inhumanity, can the scapegoat go all the way through that condition to emerge somewhere on the other side.'¹

Regarding tragedy itself, he writes elsewhere, again referencing the work of Steiner that 'Tragedy is not just about things ending badly. There are not many tragedies, whatever George Steiner cavalierly asserts in *The Death of Tragedy*, in which destruction is literally the last word. Tragedy can also mean that one must be hauled through hell to have any chance of freedom or fulfilment.' Going further, he says that 'Tragedy can be an index of the outrageous price we have sometimes to pay for them, not of their illusoriness. To claim that this is *tragic* is to insist that it would be far better were it not so. It is the antithesis of the barracks-room view that suffering makes a man of you. It is a measure of how catastrophic things are with us that change must be bought at so steep a cost. Only by some bruising encounter with the Real...a confrontation which we cannot survive undamaged, and which will leave its lethal scars silently imprinted on our existence – can we hope for genuine emancipation.'²

As can be seen from this quote (of which many others could be adduced throughout this book), Eagleton does not believe that tragedy can be easily circumscribed into a simple essence or emplotment. Rather there is a diversity of presentation and examples, with some tragic themes appearing, and others not. The 'death of tragedy' makes the mistake of assuming that tragedy comes in a single form, and when it does not conform to this schema, it cannot be considered as truly 'tragic'. In a neo-Marxist vein, Eagleton opines that that the belief in 'the death of tragedy' is often entwined with a suspicion of any kind of ideological conviction, in the sense that in our postmodern era it is difficult to advocate adherence and commitment to big ideas and values, since they are often viewed as a part of the totalizing tendency within Western metaphysics and philosophy.³ In such context a commitment to strong religious or political beliefs are viewed with suspicion. However, Eagleton argues that such a denial of 'ideology' is really a kind of 'false consciousness' which allows the truly 'ideological' dynamics of capitalism to continue unchecked. In contrast, Eagleton argues that a tragic view of the world (inflected by Judeo-Christian, literary, Marxist sources) provides a critique and delimitation of any simplistic belief in endless technological advancement or progress. Furthermore, it does not seem that Eagleton holds to the viewpoint that holding onto the tragic in our experience necessarily implies a political conservatism or resignation to fate, as can be seen in the last chapter where he reflects on the figure of the scapegoat, who represents the *limits* of the present order, rather than the *legitimation* of it.⁴ Following Walter Benjamin, Eagleton would argue that belief in 'the tragic' provides resources for revolutionary action against an 'ideological' belief in progress, in the sense that human suffering and disaster point towards the limitation of the contemporary *ancien régime*.⁵

¹ Ibid., 37.

² Ibid., 58-59.

³ 'For some death-of-tragedy theorists, we are now 'post-tragic' exactly because we are post-ideological, bereft of all synoptic vision. Tragic art, on this theory, presupposes a tragic vision – a bleak view of the world, an absolute faith for which you are prepared to die, or at least a dominant ideology to be heroically resisted. Like almost every other general view of tragedy, this one identifies the entire mode with one kind of action, and then proceeds to write off whatever fails to conform to it.' (Ibid., 9).

⁴ Ibid., 274-297.

⁵ Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History' is well-known for explicating this viewpoint. For more, see Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), *Selected Writings IV 1938-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 398-400. Benjamin is also well-known for his image of revolution as 'the emergency brake' which is applied to 'the locomotive of world history'. For this quote, see Benjamin, 'Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'', in *Selected Writings IV 1938-1940*, 402.

Our brief examination of Eagleton's work in this regard is simply to show that our understanding of 'tragedy' and 'the tragic' as we move forward cannot be equated with simplistic schemas or one mode of presentation. 'Tragedy' rather than dying has simply changed its form. As such, it cannot be equated with any one particular cultural presentation (whether it be in an Attic, Elizabethan, or modern permutation). Certainly there are common themes that can be seen as we examine tragic narratives generally speaking (necessity versus freedom, human suffering, etc.), but as can be seen (when particular tragic instantiations are examined), the presentation of these themes is not consistent, nor does every 'tragedy' contain all of these characteristics (e.g. catharsis¹, the defiant hero, the tragic flaw, disastrous ending, etc.).

In giving my own broad definition of 'tragedy' or 'the tragic', obviously one has to be very careful here since I have been arguing against any 'essentialised' view of tragedy. However (following Eagleton²): if we are to escape a kind 'nominalism' we have to advocate some kind of 'family resemblance' (Wittgenstein) between different tragic narratives. On this score, one also has to take into account here the perspective of Walter Benjamin, especially in the so-called 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue'³ to his book on the *Trauerspiel*. Benjamin argues that an 'inductive' and 'deductive' method of categorizing fails to take into account the specific contours that 'tragedy' can take. However, at the same time, pure 'nominalism' makes a philosophy of art pretty much meaningless ('philosophy' understood here as essentially dealing with 'the representation of ideas'). For Benjamin, philosophical concepts or 'ideas' have to be able to account for the extremes of their instantiations, so that the idea of 'the tragic' has to be situated within the history of being's becoming, in which its determinate 'essence' and 'origin' has to be thoroughly historical, open to continuing 'discovery' and therefore is – even though Benjamin does not use this exact language, but rather intimates it - eschatological. A philosophy of art cannot dispense with the idea of 'the tragic', even though such a formulation can only be born through the continuing labour of relating such an 'idea' against its possible extremes and marginalized instances. Taking into account these qualifications, I think the definition of Richard Sturm, who is aware of the critique of Eagleton, is helpful:

'Tragedy, originally a particular artform in ancient Greece but today a more comprehensive term going beyond specific artistic expressions, is an event, expression or experience of suffering that arouses sympathy and fear, evokes reflections on humanity's deepest values

¹ It should be mentioned here that many of these characteristics of tragedy owe their definition to Aristotle, namely from his *Poetics*. However, the exact meaning of these terms is not always so straightforward, as we can see in the debate related to the precise meaning of Aristotle's intention behind using the term 'catharsis' in his famous definition of tragedy (which he rarely uses elsewhere in relation to tragedy). For more on this, see Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek*, 26-34.

² *Sweet Violence*, 3ff.

³ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London-New York: Verso, 1998), 27-56. The obvious Socratic-Platonic tendencies of Benjamin's method here are apparent. For an excellent study that shows the Socratic method of elenchus, namely the question 'What is x?', is concerned with just this problematic, see Sean D. Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues* (New York: SUNY Press, 2012), 119-151. More particularly, see his statement on p. 243, in which he says that in the Socratic mode of questioning, regarding 'What is x?', the point of seeking a definition does not concern 'a presumably grasped whole, but a distant horizon that gathers all the discrete contexts of everyday life and demands that we consider them together, whereby the various appearances of 'what [x] is' in those contexts conflict with one another and open us up to the being of [x] as distressingly excessive'.

and concerns, and ultimately affirms providence in the discovery of hope, justice, truth or wisdom gleaned in and through that suffering.¹

I would like to expand on this definition with a few more points. Firstly, tragedy is any story where human beings are subject to *suffering* that is in some sense *unavoidable* because of their involvement in contingency and human interaction. Ben Quash writes that ‘the tragic may be summarized as the woundingly ‘embroiled’ character of human action’.² Tragedy acknowledges that there is a kind suffering, pain and limitation that is simply a part of being human, living within finite strictures; such pain or suffering as such is not necessarily ‘tragic’ but it can (in specific contexts) reach certain proportions and immensity which cannot be denied a tragic status.

Secondly (following the tradition bequeathed to us by German Idealism)³, I hold that tragedy is concerned with the reality of human *conflict* and *contingency* whereby the goods for all are not achievable for everyone within the confines of human limitation and time, whereby human freedom strains against the ‘necessity’ of living within a contingent and finite world.⁴ The reasons for these goods and freedoms not being achieved are as complex as human culture and history are complex entities, which mean that we cannot resign ourselves to fatalism assuming that unjust circumstances are simply a fact of life to be accepted. Such a tragic resignation can become one more example of an ‘ideological’ positioning of the have’s versus the have not’s, or simply a legitimization of the status quo. However, we cannot avoid the fact that human development (culture, history, technology, science, art, etc.), the struggle for justice and freedom, and our interactions with other human beings are not always going to be harmonious or happy. A cursory look at human history will disprove this point. On the face of it, history could be viewed as ‘one single catastrophe’, a ‘pile of debris’ growing toward the sky⁵, where (in the words of *Macbeth*): ‘Life’s but a walking shadow; a poor player, / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more: it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing’.⁶ These are realities we have to take account of. Nonetheless, in this thesis, our purpose will be to advocate a more hopeful vision that at the same time is able to take account of the tragic quality of human existence.

Thirdly, in light of these historical experiences, one can argue tragedy is concerned with a kind of suffering that provides a persistent *difficulty* for thought and easy resolution. Tragedy in its resilient questioning and probing of the limitations of rational explanation shows that there is a kind of suffering that exceeds every taxis or purposeful reason, and continues to remain a challenge to our thinking and reflections on human life. Concerning the tragic, Jennifer Geddes writes that ‘that there is something about it which ruptures our very ability to see clearly, state concisely, think neatly, know

¹ Sturm, ‘The Ancient Origin and Sense of Tragedy’, 32.

² Ben Quash, ‘Four Biblical Characters: In Search of a Tragedy’, in Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller, *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2011), 15.

³ Poole remarks (*Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction*, 61), it was Hegel who turned ‘tragedy into Tragedy’, thereby becoming the first tragic theorist. However, one could argue (as Peter Szondi, Simon Goldhill, and Julian Young have) that already with Schelling and Hölderlin we have some sophisticated reflections on the nature of the tragic. For more on German Idealism and its relation to tragedy, see Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek*, 68-138.

⁴ For more on this, see Poole, *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction*, 44-68; Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 101-152.

⁵ This language is taken from Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, 392.

⁶ *Macbeth* 5.5.24-28.

completely.¹ There are perspectives and suffering that imply a *loss*, entropy that cannot be easily regained, or cannot be re-attained all.² The Jewish *Sonderkommando* Salman Lewenthal, who was in charge of burning bodies in the crematoria in Auschwitz-Birkenau, wrote (in a document discovered under one of the crematoriums): 'the truth was always more atrocious, more tragic than what will be said about it'.³ As the experience of the so-called *Muselmänner*⁴ show, there is a kind of suffering which goes beyond any simplistic attempts of human description or knowledge. In spite of these realities, a tragic view of history is not necessarily tied to hopelessness, resignation or fatalism since it can awaken within us the possibilities for *compassion* (as Ricoeur and others have argued), an awareness of the *limitation* of the present state of things (as Eagleton has pointed out), and it can (as an art-form) *strive against* the apparent meaninglessness of human existence through an attempt to give dignity and beauty to those who experience tragedy (as Rowan Williams and David Toole argue).⁵ History may have a significant tragic quality, but this does not prevent it from 'providing a small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter'.⁶ In the words of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* we can posit that 'There is a world elsewhere'⁷, but at the same our social imagination needs to be confronted with the intransigent fact of the tragic, which resists overly optimistic or utopian ideals regarding social reconciliation. There are limitations to what can be achieved in the here and the now.

Regarding the use of the term 'tragedy' and 'the tragic' two things are assumed throughout this study: (1) Tragedy exists as a form of *discourse* (within analogical predication, theatre, philosophy, film, art, etc.) and as a human experience of an *empirical history*.⁸ It follows from this that (2) *tragedy-as-discourse*, as an analogical and artistic predication is based on the concrete experience of 'tragedy' and 'the tragic'⁹ as it is experienced within the realm of poetic creation and historical

¹ Jennifer L. Geddes, 'Religion and the Tragic'. *Literature & Theology* 19.2 (2005), 98.

² Cf. here John Orr: 'The tragic lies in the irreparable loss occasioned by the experience the hero has undergone', in *Tragic Realism and Modern Society*, 14.

³ Quoted in Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 82.

⁴ The term '*Muselmänner*' (literally 'Muslim') was used by prisoners of the concentration camps (mainly Auschwitz-Birkenau) to describe those reached a point of 'inhumanity' in which they were described as 'staggering corpses' or the 'living-dead'. For more on this, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 41-86. I should mention here that I am aware of some criticism that has been directed at Agamben's minimalist understanding of Holocaust testimony, namely that the extermination of the Jews was an event 'without witnesses'. It would take us too far afield to go into Agamben's justification for this rather stark conclusion. However, for some friendly criticism of Agamben in this regard, you can read Sibylle Schmidt, 'Für den Zeugen zuegen: Versuch über Agambens „Was von Auschwitz bleibt“ in Janine Böckelmann and Frank Meier (eds.), *Die gouvernementale Maschine: Zur politischen Philosophie Giorgio Agambens* (Münster: UNRAST – Verlag, 2007), 90-106. You can also read the criticisms of Oliver Marchart, *Die Politische Differenz: Zum Denken des Politischen bei Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, Laclau und Agamben* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), 227-231; Thomas Trezise in *Witnessing Witnessing: On the Reception of Holocaust Survivor Testimony* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 122-158.

⁵ This is a point argued by David Toole in his book *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 89-128. We will discuss Rowan Williams' views on this topic when we come to his essays 'The Spirit of the Age to Come' and 'Poetic and Religious Imagination'.

⁶ Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', 397.

⁷ *Coriolanus* 3.3.135

⁸ I take this distinction from Paul Janz, in relation to his discussion of Donald MacKinnon in *God, the Mind's Desire*, 171-173. For a definition of tragedy as a 'negative event' ('*Widerfahrnis*') and for what constitutes real tragedy, against a more bland use of the concept, see Reinhold Bernhardt, 'Die Erfahrung des Tragischen als Herausforderung für Theologie. Versuch zur Theodizee'. *Theologische Zeitschrift* 59 (2003), 258-259.

⁹ In this study, I will not assume a hard distinction between the terms 'tragedy' and 'the tragic' (the former referring to tragedy-as-discourse and the latter to tragedy-as-empirical history). The reason for this is that as a heuristic device it is not useful for interpreting Rowan Williams' theology who does not seem to use the distinction in this way; further, Williams himself has not engaged in any extensive engagement with tragedy within its literary form, focusing more on tragedy as an experience within history. Instead, Williams' reflections on tragedy are to be found in a more scattered fashion throughout his oeuvre, in essays and articles dealing with subjects in which the idea of 'the tragic' or 'tragedy' is important, but not the central focus. As a result of these facts, I have used 'tragedy' and 'the tragic' interchangeably throughout this study, without clearly distinguishing the difference between them in a rigorous or scientific fashion, because Williams does not seem to use such a distinction.

experience.¹ Our definitions of ‘the tragic’ are bound to the particularity of ‘tragic’ instantiations, while acknowledging the ‘family resemblance’ between different tragic examples, thereby escaping both essentialism and nominalism.² Here, we are following Ricoeur when he said that tragedy as ‘spectacle’ triumphs over tragedy as ‘speculation’.³ And finally (3), since our articulation of ‘the tragic’ always has to keep close to specific instantiations of tragedy, our speech concerning ‘tragic theology’ has to always been done with the awareness of potentially different ‘tragic theologies’ that may be enunciated. My choice of Rowan Williams entails that my proposal for a ‘tragic theology’ will take on specific forms and contours different than other ‘tragic theologies’. This by no means excludes other possibilities (as I will enunciate in the following section of this chapter); other alternatives are available. However, the question that needs to be kept in mind is whether such a ‘tragic theology’ can be conceived within an authentically Christian orthodox theology.⁴

With these distinctions in mind, we can move onto our survey of the relation between theology and tragedy, particularly focusing on its reception in modern theology, thereafter seeking to place Williams within this trajectory.

1.4. Theology and Tragedy: A Survey

Some regard tragedy and the Judeo-Christian perspective as not compatible. However, if one accepts a theory of the tragic that is less systematised, more polyform in its presentation, and a Christian theology that is less optimistic or triumphalist, then the mutual compossibility of these

¹ By saying this, I am distancing myself a bit from the position found in Reinhold Bernhardt, ‘Die Erfahrung des Tragischen als Herausforderung für Theologie’, 252-255. Bernhardt argues that theology should focus on tragedy as a phenomenological experience, rather than a literary one. I would argue that such a hard distinction is problematic since tragedy-as-discourse and tragedy-as-empirical continue to play off one another. For example, literary tragedy can expose us to a laboratory of genuine experimentation whereby our horizons and definitions of ‘the tragic’ are expanded. However, tragedy in the experienced world can serve as a realistic point of reference for determining the value of the art produced (This is what George Steiner argues in his later essay entitled ‘Absolute Tragedy’ (in *No Passion Spent*): the reason ‘absolute tragedy’ fails is because it does not correspond to lived experience, which rarely provides examples of such paramount tragedy). Therefore, I would argue, that the distinction between the historical-phenomenological and the literary-fictional needs to be complicated, as has been by scholars such as Michel De Certeau and others. For a sample of this, Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

² Cf. Larry D. Bouchard, *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology: Evil in Cotemporary Drama and Religious Thought* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), where he writes that ‘tragedy is a method of inquiry into the tragic (p. 1)’. However, it should be said here that while ‘tragedy-as-discourse might come first, historically speaking, it was not very long before tragedy-as-empirical history was used to describe historical events, without explicit reference to tragedy as a literary form. Therefore, we should not make a hardened distinction between historical tragedy and empirical tragedy, since they feed reciprocally into one another. On this, see Poole, *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction*, 14 in reference to ancient writers ascribing events as ‘tragic’ without reference to ‘tragedy’ in its Greek or literary form.

³ Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 212.

⁴ An objection might be made at this point that nowhere does Williams’ describe his own theology as ‘tragic’ and such a category might force Williams’ own theological tendencies into a potential Procrustean bed. Obviously, a full response to this objection awaits the development of this thesis but at this stage several things can be said. Firstly, if there was anyone in twentieth century theology who would undoubtedly be classified as expounding a ‘tragic theology’ it was Donald MacKinnon, who more than anyone else sought to bring ‘tragedy’ into conversation with the discipline of theology. And if this is case (as this study will show), then Williams, who follows his teacher on pretty much all points (except for his rejection of the *privatio boni*), then it follows that applying the category of ‘tragic theology’ to Williams is by no means a stretch. Furthermore, if MacKinnon is *not* expounding a ‘tragic theology’, then the critique of David Bentley Hart (a by no means unintelligent reader) directed against ‘tragic theology’ (in particular MacKinnon and Nicholas Lash) makes little sense.

Secondly, if we compare Williams to someone like John Milbank, some further points can be advanced for using this description to describe Williams’ theology. In the first instance (as we will show), Milbank is by no means opposed to appropriating a ‘tragic’ perspective within theology (something that Williams fully aware of); and yet Milbank believes that theology must ultimately move beyond tragedy. Furthermore, he is suspicious particularly of MacKinnon’s reference to tragedy, and it is because of these factors that I will classify Milbank as ultimately a ‘post-tragic’ theologian. Nonetheless, such factors have not stopped someone like David Toole ascribing the appellation of ‘tragic theology’ to Milbank’s theology (see his study *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo*). If this is the case, then applying the description of ‘tragic theology’ to Williams (who is more reticent in regard to Milbank’s ‘post-tragic’ sentiments) does not seem to be forcing Williams into a Procrustean bed of any kind.

perspectives remains an open question. Some (like George Steiner) regard the religion of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures to be anti-tragic since it is ultimately concerned with justice and recompense for human suffering. However, such a sweeping judgement has been criticized by biblical scholars themselves who have shown that biblical stories¹ and Jewish midrash² can be read in fruitful dialogue with tragic theory. It is also a well-known fact that the biblical stories (mostly stemming, at least in the Old Testament, from the so-called Deuteronomic History) have been used as tragic material for artists and playwrights (including Samson, Saul, David to mention a few), and the tragic sentiments of the books of Job and Ecclesiastes have also been noticed. The psalms of lament can also provide fruitful comparison in this regard (cf. Ps. 88). Furthermore, the early church preserved some sayings of Jesus which complicate any simplistic relation between sin and suffering, thereby complicating attempts at theodicy and any one-to-one causality between human action and the experience of evil (Luke 13.1-4, John 9.1-3), opening the possibility for a Christian perspective to embrace the 'tragic' sensibility that we often suffer beyond desert or calculation (Christ's cry of dereliction also provides some poignant reflection in this regard). We also know that the Hellenization process of *paideia* allowed Jews and Christians from early on to imbibe the cultural artefacts of Greek culture, including the tragic poets.³ Also, in the sixth century, we have Boethius describing the incarnation and divine conception of Christ as 'tremendous tragedy' (*tanta tragoedia*)⁴, probably in reference to the divine kenosis of God in Christ.⁵ And in the twelfth century, we have an example of the story of Christ's passion being re-imagined along Euripidean lines (the so-called *Christus Patiens*, whose authorship is unclear).⁶ What these examples show (there are others) is that it is by no means obvious that the Judeo-Christian tradition is inimical to tragedy, though there are some ancient views expressing their difference.⁷ Certainly, it is true that some kinds of tragedy and theology do not sit well together. For example, Paul Ricoeur, speaking about the tendency of Attic tragedians towards a 'predestination towards evil' says that 'Perhaps tragic theology should be rejected as soon as it is thought'.⁸ However, as we have shown above, tragedy and theology are by no means mutually exclusive, if we are willing to accept a broader understanding of 'the tragic'.

In what follows, I aim to give a survey of the relation between tragedy and theology, as it has been discussed by contemporary theological thinkers. I do not aim to be comprehensive, nor can I engage in detailed readings with every thinker. I will simply attempt to situate each thinker as best as I can within the three categories discussed earlier, namely *theology as tragic or paradoxically tragic*, *theology as anti-tragic or non-tragic*, and *theology as post-tragic or partially tragic*. The purpose of this survey is to situate Rowan Williams within this debate.

¹ J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Thomas C. Römer, 'Why Would the Deuteronomists Tell about the Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter?', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 77 (1998), 27-38; Ben Quash, 'Four Biblical Characters', in *Christian Theology and Tragedy*, 15-32.

² For this, see Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia-Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 123-143.

³ Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (London-Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).

⁴ Boethius, *Contra Eutychem et Nestoriam*, trans. H.F. Stewart and E.K. Rand. Loeb Classical Library (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1918), chap. 5, 105.

⁵ This is the opinion of Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 12.

⁶ 'Introduction', in *Christian Theology and Tragedy*, 7.

⁷ We know that Clement of Alexandria was fond of quoting the Attic tragedians, though this was sometimes to precisely to distinguish the Christian story from Greek tragedy. On this, see Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 12.118.5-119.1. *Patrologia Graeca* 9, (ed.) J.-P. Migne (Petit-Montrouge Excudebatur, 1857). I owe this reference to Cyprian Krause.

⁸ *The Symbolism of Evil*, 212.

Among modern theologians, one of the first to deal with the theme of the tragic was Reinhold Niebuhr in his book *Beyond Tragedy*¹, which – as its title suggests – was an attempt to come to an Christian understanding of history which was able to account for the reality of tragedy, while at the same time being able to move ‘beyond tragedy’.² Niebuhr’s understanding of history and God’s action within it are ‘dialectical’ in the sense that ‘The relation between the temporal and the eternal is dialectical. The eternal is revealed and expressed in the temporal but not exhausted by it.’³ Since Christianity rejects pantheism and dualism, this perspective seems to be the only option which moves between these twin errors. God cannot be identified with the movement of history, characterised as it is by limitation and human sinfulness, which Niebuhr characterises as ‘egoism’ in its essential form⁴ and ‘tragic’ in the sense that humanity denies its ‘most essential nature’. However, ‘The God of the Christian faith is not only creator but redeemer. He does not allow human existence to end tragically. He snatches victory from defeat. He [sic] is Himself defeated in history but He also is victorious in that defeat.’⁵ As such then, ‘The Christian faith consequently does not defy the tragic facts of human existence by a single victory over tragedy; nor does it flee the tragedy of temporal existence into a heavenly escape.’⁶ He goes on to say that ‘The ultimate fulfilment of life transcends the possibilities of history. There is no hope of overcoming the contradictions, in which life stands, in history...God must overcome this inescapable contradiction’.⁷ For Niebuhr then, ‘Christianity is a religion which transcends tragedy...The cross is not tragic but the resolution of tragedy’.⁸ In terms of his own definition of tragedy, Niebuhr holds to a pretty standard interpretation of the tragic, focusing mostly Greek tragic drama as the model in which the defiant tragic hero⁹ is paramount, and in which suffering is ‘self-inflicted’.¹⁰ He also holds to the view that while Christianity and tragedy are similar in the sense that both deny that ‘the titanic forces of human existence’ can ‘easily be brought under the control of some little scheme of prudent rationality’, and he believes that Christianity denies ‘the inevitability of guilt in all human creativity’ because ‘Sin emerges...out of freedom and is possible only because man is free.’¹¹ Therefore evil is not ‘a part of essential man’.¹² For Niebuhr (as he has written elsewhere): ‘the tragic antinomies of life’ are ‘the consequence of the corruption of freedom’.¹³

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (London: Nisbet, 1938).

² ‘It is the thesis of these essays that the Christian view of history passes through the sense of the tragic to a hope and an assurance which is “beyond tragedy”. The cross, which stands at the centre of the Christian worldview, reveals both the seriousness of human sin and the purpose and the power of God to overcome it.’ (Ibid., x).

³ Ibid., 4.

⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁸ Ibid., 155.

⁹ ‘In true tragedy the hero defies malignant power to assert the integrity of his soul. He suffers because he is strong and not because he is weak. He involves himself in guilt not by his vice but by his virtue. This tragic level of life is an achievement of few.’ (Ibid., 156). Niebuhr also spoke elsewhere about the inability of ‘modern experience’ to accept ‘irony’ and ‘pathos’, but that it was unable to be grasped under the rubric of ‘tragedy because contemporary culture has no vantage point of faith from which to understand the predicament of modern man. It is therefore incapable either of rising to a tragic defiance of destiny, as depicted in Greek drama, or of achieving a renewal of life through a contrite submission to destiny, as in Christian Tragedy’. This quote can be found in Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern View of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), 9. It should also be said here that Niebuhr seems to have a preference for the Greek tragedians over Greek philosophy, since in their understanding of history they were able to recognize that ‘there are tragic antinomies in life which can not be brought into a simple rational harmony’ and as such ‘were closer to the ultimate truth about life than the philosophers’ (*Faith and History*, 155).

¹⁰ *Beyond Tragedy*, 160.

¹¹ Ibid., 165-166.

¹² Ibid., 168.

¹³ *Faith and History*, 58.

From this, we can see that Niebuhr is able to give space to the tragic within history, but it is presupposed that such tragedy is analogous to the Attic forms of tragedy (which is understood in largely homogenous and generalized terms), and that Christian hope moves 'beyond' such tragedy. He also assumes that tragedy teaches or presupposes a radical understanding of evil, in the sense that evil is an 'essential' part of nature. Such an assumption again presupposes a particular construal of 'the tragic' which is not universally applicable to all forms of tragedy. Furthermore, his eschatological position on tragedy does not seem to give an adequate account of how history *itself* is redeemed, because the Christian hope lies largely *beyond* history since it transcends the limitations of time. But the question that might be posed to Niebuhr is how – eschatologically – are we able to give dignity (without trivialisation) to our distinctly *human existence as temporal beings* within such a schema? These are questions which deserve further attention, something which Niebuhr does not discuss in detail. And it is these questions which haunted T.S. Eliot in the *Four Quartets*, and consequently Rowan Williams himself when he wrestled with these texts (to be discussed in chapter three). Furthermore, Niebuhr's appropriation of 'the tragic' (and his whole project of 'Christian realism') has been interpreted by some thinkers (like Milbank and Hauerwas) as simply an underpinning of contemporary neo-liberalism, thereby excluding theology from any *substantive* contributions to understanding the socio-political order of things. In these schema, liberalism becomes simply a 'tragic necessity' which needs to be embraced, since a properly *Christian* politics centred on the love of God revealed in the cross of Christ cannot (in Niebuhr's interpretation) be the basis for a legitimate socio-political program.¹ Rowan Williams himself has expressed reservations about Niebuhr (echoing the critiques of Milbank² and Hauerwas³) regarding 'the tragic' being used as 'a vehicle for absolution' apart from considerations of the 'complex motivations' of certain actions.⁴ In light of these comments, while we can commend Niebuhr for his attempt to appropriate 'the tragic' for theological thought, there are several questions that still need to be answered.

Another theologian who engaged extensively with 'the tragic' was Niebuhr's contemporary Paul Tillich. One can see that from early on (already from his time as a professor at Frankfurt) that Tillich was interested in questions of philosophy, fate and necessity. This fact can be seen in his inaugural lecture as the Professor of Philosophy at Frankfurt entitled 'Philosophie und Schicksal' (1929)⁵, and translated into English as 'Philosophy and Fate'.⁶ Here we can see that Tillich is concerned with

¹ This is also tied to Niebuhr's belief in the dialectical (and even conflictual) relation between love and justice. Niebuhr has said that 'The higher possibilities of love, which is at once the fulfillment and the negation of justice, always hover over every system of justice' in Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man I* (Louisville-London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 285. Later on, he says that 'sacrificial love' is related to 'mutual love' in the same way that we understand 'the general relation of super-history to history' in Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man II*, 69.

² John Milbank, 'The Poverties of Niebuhrism', in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 233-254. Milbank argues that Niebuhr's ethic is ultimately more 'Stoic' than 'Christian'.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), 87-140. Hauerwas claims and argues that Niebuhr's liberalism ultimately led him to a theology that was based on anthropology and a Jamesian understanding of religious experience that he never ultimately disavowed.

⁴ Rowan Williams, 'The Health of the Spirit', in Michael W. Brierley (ed.), *Public Life and the Place of the Church: Reflections to Honour the Bishop of Oxford* (Aldershot; England: Ashgate, 2006), 219. Williams probably has in mind here Niebuhr's acceptance of nuclear armament as some kind of 'tragic' reality which needs to be accepted, if not endorsed.

⁵ For the original German text of this lecture, see Paul Tillich, *Philosophical Writings/ Philosophische Schriften*, (ed.) Gunther Wenz, in *Main Works/ Hauptwerke*, vol. 1, (ed.) Carl Heinz Ratschow (Berlin-New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1989), 310-319. Tillich was interested in these questions even before he received his professorship, as can be seen from his essay 'Kairos und Logos: Eine Untersuchung zur Metaphysik der Erkenntnis' (1926), in *Philosophische Schriften*, 269-296.

⁶ For the English text, see Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, trans. James Luther Adams (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1948), 3-15.

question of how philosophy may speak of 'truth' (in the Platonic sense) when it is entwined with 'fate'. In his words 'Fate is the transcendent necessity in which freedom is entangled' and that 'there is no freedom, there is no fate; there is simply necessity. A merely physical object that is conditioned in all respects is entirely without fate because it is wholly bound to necessity. The more freedom there is, that is, the more the self-determination (or the greater the autonomous power), the more the susceptibility to fate.'¹ As such, the philosopher is caught up into the flux of time and fate, and cannot extricate him or herself from this reality, since philosophy is a time-bound discourse.² As such there is no access to 'truth' apart from 'fate' in the dialectic between 'freedom' and 'necessity'³ and he argues that it was the deficit of Greek philosophy that it sought to move out of the realm of fate and tragedy, whereas tragic literature sought to hold onto the ideal of 'the hero who in freedom endures and overcomes his fate.'⁴ However, Tillich believes that with the dawn of Christianity, we have something new that enters the horizon in which 'time triumphs over space'⁵ in the sense that the Judeo-Christian view of history replaced the Greek cyclic view of time, thereby undermining the presuppositions of Greek tragedy and philosophy.⁶

Tillich's more mature reflections however display that he is willing to allow the tragic sensibility of life to invade his theological reflections and that he is willing to give them space in his reflections on Christian doctrine. Such reflections come particularly to the fore when Tillich discusses the themes of created finitude, namely the movement from 'essence to existence' ('Creation') that coincides with (but is logically distinct from) 'estrangement' ('The Fall').⁷ Such a transition from essence to existence is the basis for humanity's freedom, but it is also the basis for our estrangement from the Ground of Being, the reason for humanity's 'anxiety'⁸ regarding its existence within the dialectic of being and non-being.⁹ For Tillich, 'the Fall' is primarily a 'symbol' of humanity's condition universally and does not refer to a particular event within time, but is rather the presupposition of every free human act.

¹ *The Protestant Era*, 13-14.

² *Ibid.*, 4: 'Not only the philosopher as a man but also the philosopher as philosopher has a fate, and this means that philosophy itself has a fate [italics original].'

³ *Ibid.*, 15: '[T]he history of philosophy shows that all existence stands in fate. Every finite thing possesses a certain power of being of its own and thus possesses a capacity for fate. The greater a finite thing's autonomous power of being is, the higher is its capacity for fate and the more deeply is the knowledge of it involved in fate.. Hence even our knowledge of the fateful character of philosophy must at the same time stand in logos and in kairos. If it stood only in the kairos, it would be without validity and the assertion would be valid only for the one making it; if it stood only in the logos, it would be without fate and would therefore have no part in existence, for existence is involved in fate.'

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5: 'Tragedy presents the hero who in freedom endures and overcomes his fate. Philosophy gives knowledge, a knowledge by means of which man is united with the eternal One, beyond fate. This attitude of Greek philosophy, whereby it deprived all things and all forms of life of their ultimate power and concentrated the power of being in one substance, in the result of the highest abstraction, in "Pure Being," is not intelligible except as the consequence of a dire need. It is the need to overcome the bondage to fate and tragedy.'

⁵ Elsewhere, Tillich writes of the relation between 'space' and 'tragedy' (in a way that seems to complicate his earlier strong distinction between tragedy and philosophy) that 'Human existence under the predominance of space is tragic...Greek tragedy, philosophy, and art were wrestling with the tragic law of our spatial existence. They were seeking for an immovable being beyond the circle of genesis and decay, greatness and self-destruction, something beyond tragedy', in Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, (ed.), Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 33.

⁶ *The Protestant Era*, 8: 'The irreversible, unrepeatable character of time, its meaningful directedness, replaces the cyclic, ever recurrent becoming and passing-away. A "gracious" destiny that brings salvation in time and history subdues a demonic fate which denies the new in history. Thus the Greek view of life and the world is overcome, and with it the presupposition of Greek philosophy as well as of Greek tragedy.'

⁷ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology II* (Great Britain: University of Chicago, 1957), 33-50. For Tillich, since the transition from 'essence to existence' coincides with 'estrangement', it difficult to avoid the conclusion that 'Creation' and 'the Fall' correspond to the same reality (something that Tillich acknowledges and accepts). It should be said here that Tillich is drawing the language of 'estrangement' from Hegel. Regarding Hegel, Tillich interpreted him 'tragically' in the sense that Hegel's 'system' represented for Tillich an example of tragic 'hubris'. On this, see Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*, (ed.) Carl E. Braaten (New York: Siimon & Schuster, 1967-68), 411-414.

⁸ *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 35-41.

⁹ For more on this, see Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology I* (Great Britain: University of Chicago, 1951), 197-227.

And it is this underlying reality, 'the myth of the transcendent Fall' that is the basis for the 'the tragic-universal character of existence' in which 'Existence is rooted both in ethical freedom and in tragic destiny'.¹ Such a 'tragic universality' and 'estrangement' is the basis for humanity's enmeshment within sin (which Tillich analyses according to the traditional tripartite division of 'unbelief', 'hubris', and 'concupiscence').² In regard to 'hubris', Tillich makes explicit reference to the heroes of Greek tragedy who, because of their 'greatness' aspired to 'the self-elevation of man into the sphere of the divine'³, and it is precisely this 'greatness' that is the basis for 'the tragic' since 'The self-transcendence of life, which reveals to man the greatness of life, leads under the conditions of existence to the tragic character of life, to the ambiguity of the great and the tragic. Only the great is able to have tragedy.'⁴ Within this matrix of 'hubris' and 'greatness', however, Tillich does make a distinction between 'the tragic' and 'the demonic'. He writes that 'The tragic is the inner ambiguity of human greatness. But the subject of tragedy does not *aspire* to divine greatness. He does not intend "to be like God". He touches, so to speak, the divine sphere, and he is rejected by it into self-destruction, but he does not claim divinity for himself. Wherever this is done, the demonic appears. A main characteristic of the tragic is the state of being blind; a main characteristic of the demonic is the state of being split.'⁵

'Tragedy' does provide some context for Tillich's understanding of redemption and 'New Being' that is found in the reconciling act of Christ, who remained united to the Source of Being, despite being involved in 'finitude' and 'the tragic element of existence' in which his saving act of death on a cross is at the same time the creation of 'guilt' for those who were involved in his death.⁶ Christ, despite these tragic realities, is able to bring these 'negativities' into union with God: 'The conquest of existential estrangement in the New Being, which is of the Christ, does not remove finitude and anxiety, ambiguity and tragedy; but it does have the character of taking the negativities of existence into unbroken unity with God'.⁷

Regarding human action, Tillich believes that human freedom is always bound by 'destiny' and 'finitude' in the flux of 'dynamic and form' and we cannot seek to remove ourselves from such a context. Therefore, human history always remains potentially open to 'the tragic' and 'the demonic', which can manifest itself in human culture, including religious and socio-political systems.⁸ Nonetheless, hope is not vanquished (even though we cannot overcome finitude and tragedy⁹), but

¹ *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 43

² *Ibid.*, 51-63.

³ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology III* (Great Britain: University of Chicago, 1963), 98.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁶ *Systematic Theology II*, 144-155.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁸ *Systematic Theology III*, 108-113.

⁹ 'No life is able to overcome finiteness, sin, and tragedy. The illusions of our period have been that modern civilization can conquer them, and that we can achieve security in our own existence. Progress seemed to have conquered tragedy; the divine order seemed to be embodied in the progressive, historical order. But for nearly three decades our generation has received blow after blow, destroying that illusion, and driving to despair and cynicism those who wanted to transform, and thought they could transform, the historical order into a divine order. Let us learn from the catastrophe of our time at least the fact that no life and no period are able to overcome finiteness, sin, and tragedy', in Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 22.

remains positioned within the dialectic of hope and tragedy in which we may hope for 'guilt' and 'wrath' to be finally conquered.¹

From our examination above, it seems to be the case that Tillich could be said to advance a 'paradoxically' tragic theology. His strong emphasis on the relation between finitude, as well as the binding together of 'creation' and 'fall' however open the path for a tragic theology of a rather stringent kind, and this is where a potential problem arises for Tillich (as can be seen already in Niebuhr's early criticism of his theology of sin²): if creation and estrangement 'coincide' in which 'Actualised creation and estranged existence are identical' (taking into account his emphasis on their 'logical difference' and that fact that 'the leap from essence to existence' is not a 'structural necessity')³, then how, firstly, might we understand accepting our properly *temporal* and *material* being as moving us *towards* God, rather being 'estranged' from God? Does not the incarnation and kenosis of God-in-Christ, in which the limitation and weakness are accepted, move Christ *towards* God rather than *from* God (cf. Phil. 2.6-11)? And does not this coincidence of creation and estrangement reaffirm the perennial 'androcentric' perspective whereby spirituality and materiality are sundered from one another?⁴ In other words, how are we to understand creation and materiality as fundamentally *good* within this paradigm? Secondly, does not Tillich's equation of 'creation' and 'estrangement' move sin and separation from God into an *ontological* necessity not merely a *contingent* necessity (to echo the language of David Tracy)? Within Tillich's scheme, is not sin simply a flowering of what we are ('estranged' from our Source of Being) rather than a distortion of what of our 'essence' is? How are we to understand sin as a perversion of the good, rather than just a manifestation our existence as *already* estranged from God?⁵ As J. Heywood Thomas wrote, in an early critique of Paul Tillich's theology, does not Tillich's 'half-way demythologization' of the myth of the Fall (in which he does not distinguish between 'the myth itself and his interpretative concept')⁶ result in 'a strange intellectualization of the myth, and its employment of the concepts of implication makes the necessity of sin suspiciously like logical necessity. If this is the case then there is no further possibility of retaining the distinction between finitude and sin.'⁷ More recent studies come to similar conclusions: Samuel Loncar has shown the incoherency of Tillich's theology of human agency and the Fall (an inconsistency which Loncar traces to Tillich's Idealist heritage), namely in relation to the fact that

¹ Tillich asks the question (*The Shaking of the Foundations*, 74): '[I]s tragedy stronger than hope? Does the past conquer the future? Is wrath more powerful than mercy? We are driven to and fro between melancholy and expectation—from tragedy to hope, from hope to tragedy. In this situation we may be ready to receive the message of a new being, a new kind of existence which is not only hope, but also reality, in which Divine wrath and human guilt ultimately are conquered. Christianity is based on this message: God subjecting Himself to transitoriness and wrath, in order to be with us. And thus is fulfilled the hope of which the psalmist sings: "Let thy work appear unto thy servants and thy glory upon thy children."

² Reinhold Niebuhr, 'Biblical Thought and Ontological Speculation in Tillich's Theology' in Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (eds.), *The Theology of Paul Tillich* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), 215-226.

³ *Systematic Theology II*, 50.

⁴ For an appreciative, but also critical interpretation of Paul Tillich generally, see Rachel Sophia Baard, 'Tillich and Feminism', Russell Re Manning (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 273-287.

⁵ It should be said that in regard to the topic of sin, Tillich followed the traditional Augustinian distinctions (unbelief, hubris, and concupiscence); however, his move towards equating creation with the *privatio boni* is definitely a move beyond the Augustinian tradition.

⁶ One common critique of Tillich's correlation method is that in his attempt to situate Christian theology within the matrix of existentialist and secular thought, he predetermines the answer Christian tradition can give to the modern person by circumscribing it within *a priori* existentialist categories. In relation to his use of concept of 'estrangement', Oswald Bayer has applied this criticism to Tillich's doctrine of sin referencing the possible dangers of correlation method which can become 'a closed circle' because its questions already determine its answers in a radical way. For more on this, Oswald Bayer, 'Tillich as a Systematic Theologian, in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, 23-25.

⁷ J. Heywood Thomas, *Paul Tillich: An Appraisal* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), 131.

Tillich wants to articulate an atemporal Fall, while at the same time he also desires an agent to enact it (an inescapably historical concept). If such an agent is not human (since that would imply temporality), then who is the agent? Is it God, or a demiurge, or something else? Since Tillich wants to avoid the Manichaean conclusion, it is difficult not to conclude that the agent is God. But then it would seem that for Tillich, God creates a world that is *already* fallen, since for the movement from 'essence' to 'existence' that constitutes creation involves a 'distancing' between Creator and creature, which is the substantial basis for our fallenness.¹ If this interpretation is correct, then it would seem that Tillich lays the foundation for a *radically tragic* theology that will flower later in feminist thinkers like Kathleen Sands, a position which we will distance ourselves from in this study.

Some other significant theological thinkers of the twentieth century, like Karl Rahner and Karl Barth wrote little concerning the subject of tragedy or 'the tragic' in general. The *Church Dogmatics* very rarely references tragedy at all. There is one reference to the Greek tragedian Euripedes, but he is mentioned in a context that makes no reference to tragedy per se.² When Barth does make reference to 'tragedy' or 'the tragic', there is little explication what he means by these terms. However, one can extrapolate from some of his statements the way Barth would have dealt with the topic of 'tragedy' within his theological reflections. Since tragedy is bound up with the inherent finite and bounded quality of human existence, one could argue (as Larry Bouchard does)³ that Barth would have placed 'tragedy' and 'the tragic' within 'the negative aspect' of creation, which while sorrowful and even painful, should not be equated with *Das Nichtige* (as discussed in §50 of CD III/3).⁴ Furthermore (as we can see from Barth's only explicit treatment of tragedy within the *Church Dogmatics*), our pain and suffering is denied a tragic interpretation since God, through divine mercy, has freely accepted our 'anguish', leaving us little to 'lament' since God has already assumed our agony into the divine heart. Any reference to an experience of 'divine pain' or 'tragic consciousness' is 'presumptuous' because as a result of God's merciful act in Christ 'the tragedy of human existence is dissolved'. Because of this, we cannot lament because of our pain, but have to admit our existence as 'sinners and debtors' towards God.⁵ Based on these remarks, it would seem that for Barth (after Christ) humanity cannot really claim the category of 'tragedy' for itself since this would absolve it of admitting its complicity within sin, and further it would deny that in Christ God has 'dissolved' tragedy within the divine being. With this, the foundation is laid here for Balthasar's later denial that there is any 'tragedy' in the true sense after Christ. Pertaining to this position, it could be said that this move is part of the 'Christomonist'⁶ tendency¹ within Barth's theological project whereby Christ becomes the cipher and

¹ Samuel Loncar, 'German Idealism's Long Shadow: The Fall and Divine-Human Agency in Tillich's Systematic Theology', *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 54.1 (2012), 95-118.

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.2: The Doctrine of Creation*, trans. H. Knight et al (London-New York: T & T Clark, 1960), 279.

³ Bouchard, *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology*, 49ff.

⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3: The Doctrine of Creation*, trans. G.W. Bromiley and R.J. Ehrlich (London-New York: T & T Clark, 1960), 295-302. For a discussion of Barth's theology of *Das Nichtige*, see Wolf Krötke, *Sin and Nothingness in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Phillip G. Ziegler and Christina Maria Bammel. *Studies in Reformed Theology and History* (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2005); Matthias D. Wütrich, 'Das >>fremde Geheimnis des wirklich Nichtigen<<. Karl Barths einsamer Denkweg in der Frage des Bösen', in Michael Beintker, Christian Link, Michael Trowitzsch (eds.), *Karl Barth im europäischen Zeitgeschehen (1935-1950): Widerstand – Bewahrung – Orientierung* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010), 395-411.

⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.1: The Doctrine of God*, trans. T.H.L Parker et al (London-New York: T & T Clark, 1957), 374.

⁶ I am aware that the term 'Christomonist' is a controversial interpretation of Barth's Christology, and I by no means use it as a blank description of Barth's entire Christology. By 'Christomonist' I appropriate the definition of Wolf Krötke (made in reference to Paul Althaus) in which he says that 'Christomonism' is a concept that 'levels out the contradictory experiences of the history

an alembic through which all history, experience and suffering is understood, to such an extent that the trauma and afflictions history are absorbed into the Christ-event. Such a tendency within Barth lacks the appropriate attention to contingency of history (since everything the Christ-event is essentially a part of the divine *Urgeschichte* that is simply actualized in time)², an appropriate pneumatology in which our own suffering is made 'present' with the sufferings of Christ rather than just absorbing them³, and a Christology of 'representation' rather than a sweeping Christology of 'substitution' which is able to give dignity to the suffering and oppressed by distinguishing them as truly *Other* from Christ while at the same time giving their suffering meaning by patterning it after his passion (cf. Matt 25. 31-46).⁴ However, despite all these points, it should be admitted that Barth is not entirely consistent on this point. An examination of his mature reflections on the book of Job⁵ show that he was able to positively appropriate the concept of lament into his theology, in which the suffering and second-person experience⁶ between God and Job escapes broad and sweeping systematizations which are 'permanently and universally valid' because such assertions are unable to account for the freedom of God in particular relation to Job.⁷ Such an avenue might provide a more fruitful engagement between Barth's legacy and tragic theory, which is concerned fundamentally with the *particularity* of human suffering.

When we examine Karl Rahner's magnum opus *Theological Investigations* we find a few scattered references to 'tragedy' or 'the tragic' but these are almost always very generalised uses of the word,

of God and humanity on the basis of a particular principle', in Krötke, 'Christocentricism' in Hans Dieter Betz et al (eds.), *Religion Past and Present*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 620.

¹ I say 'tendency' because I am aware that Barth's Christology is not fully consistent, as I will point out shortly in this text. In regard to the Barth's doctrine of reconciliation (CD IV/1ff.), Jüngel states in *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, trans. Garret E. Paul (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 46, that, "[t]his doctrine was both a massive recapitulation and a thorough revision of Barth's entire dogmatics..." For more on these tensions, see McCormack, 'Karl Barth's Historicized Christology: Just How Chalcedonian is It?', in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 201-233). Bruce McCormack argues in detail elsewhere that a shift occurred in Barth's theology as a result of his appropriation of an anhypostatic-enhypostatic Christology into dialectical theology after his move to Göttingen, thereby granting more place to the story of Jesus as an extension over time than was possible in Barth's use of consistent eschatology in *Der Römerbrief*. On this, see McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 327-374. On how Barth's later attendance to narrative Christology creates aporias in relation to Barth's earlier theology of revelation in CD I/1, see Rowan Williams, 'Barth on the Triune God' in *Wrestling with Angels*, 106-149. Williams' whole discussion on this topic is illuminating where he argues that Barth's later reflections on the Trinity in CD IV/1ff., as it is rethought through the lens of Barth's doctrine of God's eternal self-determination for an historical existence in Jesus Christ (CD II/2), opens up possibilities for a greater emphasis for human participation in the revelation process, one that is able to include contingency, doubt, uncertainty, and weakness. However, are these possibilities which Barth did not expound upon, and they remain in tension with Barth's earlier theology of revelation in CD I/1. The question remains however whether Williams is interpreting Barth here through a more *Balthasarian* lens than a *Barthian* one.

² This is the criticism of Barth that is made by Rowan Williams in his essay, 'Barth on the Triune God' and by Nathan R. Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 63-92.

³ See Williams, 'Word and Spirit', in *On Christian Theology*, 107-127; Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Malum: Theologische Hermeneutik des Bösen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 113-117. Dalferth's comments should be read in light of his comments concerning the modes of divine presence which 'perfects' itself and 'adapts' to the multiplicity of world contingencies. On this, see Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Becoming Present: An Inquiry into the Christian Sense of the Presence of God* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 152-156.

⁴ Pannenberg states the beginning of Christology of 'inclusive representation' to P.K. Marheineke, and finds exemplary expression in the work of Dorothee Sölle. For Pannenberg, Barth's Christology of 'substitution' is 'totalitarian' since it amounts to 'a replacement of those represented'. For more on this, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology II*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 429-437. One can also read a philosophically and theologically acute (but brief) critique of substitutionary Christology in John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 77-80. Milbank argues that 'substitution alone' model is linked to an 'instrumentalised Christology' whereby Christ is understood to compensate for humanity's 'lack' rather than 'exceeding the occasion of his arrival'. And precisely because it is instrumentalised it results in 'a fetishistic, over-pious and too literally mimetic devotion to Christ's life and death' which is 'reduced to literal terms and shorn of its allegorical links with the intrinsic shape of every human destiny' (p. 80).

⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.3.1: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (London-New York: T & T Clark, 1961), 453-461.

⁶ The language of second-person experience is drawn from Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), 75-81.

⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.3.1*, 458.

without any significance reference to tragic theory. Any assumptions about what constitutes tragedy are left in the background. Most of the references are to be found in contexts where Rahner is dealing with the questions of freedom¹, salvation² and the church³ within the context of temporality and finitude, tragic guilt⁴, sin and death.⁵ In reference to existentialism, Rahner also coins the term 'tragic humanism' but does not develop it much further in this context⁶ (though Terry Eagleton has taken up this same phrase more recently to distinguish the 'tragic humanism' of Marxism, Christianity and psychoanalysis from the 'liberal humanism of modernity').⁷ However, generally speaking, Rahner largely remains within the minimalist bounds of a more generalised treatment of *tragedy-as-empirical experience* rather than *tragedy-as-discourse*. As result, there is no sustained treatment of the theme of tragedy; therefore, we will not go into more detail regarding his thought on this point.

Johann Baptist Metz (a student of Rahner) however does bear some mention in this regard. He does not make mention of 'tragedy' or 'the tragic' per se in the text I will examine, but he does make mention of holding onto the memory of suffering (*memoria passionis*) in a radical way, as well as some other themes which make his position cohere with the kind of 'tragic' theology I am pursuing in this thesis. Metz's seminal essay entitled 'Future in the Memory of Suffering' (originally published in 1972)⁸ is an exemplary exposition of this idea. I cannot go into full detail regarding this essay, but it seems clear that Metz's emphasis on the *memoria passionis* as a form of political imagination against

¹ 'The tragic conflict between the objectively justified and obligatory demand, on the one hand, and the subjective conscience in good faith, on the other, is insoluble in practice. Its tragedy must be accepted with patience and mutual respect as a sign of the imperfection of the order here below', Karl Rahner, 'The Dignity and Freedom of Man', in *Theological Investigations: The Centenary Electronic Edition*, vol. 2, trans. Karl H. Kruger (Limerick, Ireland: Mary's Immaculate College, 2004), 252.

² 'Salvation-history interprets the history of the world as something antagonistic and veiled. Precisely because salvation is not simply the immanent fruit of profane history, Christianity is sceptical towards profane history. It lets man go out to his worldly task, because it is precisely in the obscurity and ambiguity of this earthly task that man must work out his salvation which is by faith. Yet for Christianity this very task in the world is something which will always remain unfinished and which will ultimately always again end in failure. For as far as the individual is concerned, this task always finds an absolute limit in death, in the same way Christianity also shows that death is to be found even in the midst of universal history. This implies a futility arising from the fact that what can always be planned only partially will always remain incalculable – a futility which always springs afresh out of man's evil heart, even over and above the inherent tragedy of everything finite. Christianity knows no history which would evolve of its own inner power into the kingdom of God itself and it does not really matter whether one conceives this kingdom as the realm of the enlightened mind, or of the fully civilized man, or of the classless society or in any other way whatsoever', in Rahner, 'The History of the World and Salvation-History', in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, 111.

³ Rahner speaks of '[the] dark tragedy of the Church's history of ideas is all the more depressing, since it always or often involved questions which have a profound influence on the concrete life of human beings, for such false precepts (which objectively were never valid or had long become [80] obsolete through cultural and economic changes not at first recognized by the institutional Church) imposed burdens on human beings (at the same time endangering their salvation) which were not at all legitimate in the light of the freedom of the Gospel' in 'On Bad Arguments in Moral Theology', *Theological Investigations*, vol. 18, 79-80.

⁴ '...[M]an can also never find himself, objectively speaking, in the tragic situation of being able to choose only between different ways of becoming guilty, so that no matter what alternative he chooses, he necessarily incurs guilt. In certain situations the only choice open to us may lie between two actions, both of which must be regarded as harmful and wrong in a certain respect; yet, objectively speaking, no situation can ever force us into guilt' in Rahner, 'Guilt and its Remission: The Borderland Between Theology and Psychotherapy', in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2, 267.

⁵ 'The Christian doctrine of original sin, the full implications of which cannot of course be developed here, seems to me to involve the conviction that sin as selfishness, opposed to the unifying force of love, always and everywhere – not merely in the dimension of a personal interiority, but also in social life –affects the history of mankind and that this tragic situation will remain a permanent existential of mankind's history to the very end' in 'The Unity of the Church – The Unity of Mankind', in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 20, 161.

⁶ 'The Theological Dimension of the Question about Man', in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 17, 54.

⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2009). Eagleton defines 'tragic humanism' in the following way (p. 168-169): 'Tragic humanism shares liberal humanism's vision of the free flourishing of humanity; but it holds that this is possible only by confronting the e very worst. The only affirmation of humanity worth having in the end is one which...seriously wonders whether humanity is worth saving in the first place...Tragic humanism, whether in its socialist, Christian, or psychoanalytic varieties, holds that only by a process of self-dispossession and radical remaking can humanity come into its own. There are no guarantees that such a transfigured future will ever be born. But it might arrive a little earlier if liberal dogmatists, doctrinaire flag-wavers for Progress, and Islamophobic intellectuals did not continue to stand in its way.'

⁸ This essay can now be found more accessibly in Metz, 'The Future in the Memory of Suffering' [1972], in Johann-Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann, *Faith and the Future: Essays on Theology, Solidarity and Modernity*. Concilium Series (New York: Maryknoll, 1995), 3-16.

contemporary forms of technological progress and efficiency which obviate the reality of suffering (a point clearly inspired by Walter Benjamin and others from the so-called Frankfurt School) point towards a more 'tragic' tone in his understanding of history.¹ The remembrance that the Church is commissioned with is 'to keep alive the memory of the crucified Lord...as a dangerous memory of freedom in the social systems of our technological civilization'.² Such a memory constitutes a kind of 'antihistory' in which the 'the vanquished and the destroyed alternatives' are taken into account³, something that is made possible by the Christian belief in the resurrection in which 'the vanquished and the forgotten' have 'a meaning that is as yet unrealized'.⁴ Metz insists that such suffering is 'antiteleological' (resisting any final 'reconciliation of man and nature' or any 'scholasticism of suffering' which tries to give meaning to meaningless suffering) and that it is 'antontological' (resisting any 'ontologization of human torment'). For Metz, suffering shows the contrast between nature and history, teleology and eschatology⁵ and this is part of his project to hold onto the openness of history⁶ in which the 'history of suffering has no goal, but – at most – it has a future'.⁷ Based on these statements, it would seem that while Metz does not use the language of 'tragedy' or 'the tragic' in this essay explicitly, his resistance to resolving the problem of suffering, his scepticism of theodicy and a teleology of suffering (especially after Auschwitz)⁸, his emphasis on the irresolvable conflict between man and nature, ultimately point towards a 'tragic' theology which avoids, firstly, any attempt to ontologize violence or human torment, and secondly, does not resign itself to fatalism or hopelessness since it seeks to advocate a socio-political and liberatory imagination based on the *memoria passionis*. As such, Metz coheres with the kind of 'tragic' theology that we will be advancing in this essay.

In distinction from Barth and Rahner, one continental theologian who did have a lot to say about tragedy was Hans Urs Von Balthasar. He devotes an entire chapter to the Greek tragedians in the fourth volume of his *Herrlichkeit*.⁹ We cannot examine in detail Balthasar's in-depth and sometimes beautiful engagement with Greek tragedy¹⁰, but can only bring out its specific contours. For Balthasar,

¹ In a Benjaminian inspired statement (referencing the first thesis of Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'), Metz says (Ibid., 6) that 'Political imagination will prevent itself from ultimate absorption by the restrictive grasp of technology, as long as it keeps the moral imagination and power to resist that have grown out of the memory of suffering accumulated in history. The dwarf stands for the memory of this suffering: in our advanced social systems, suffering is pictured as insignificant, ugly, and better kept out of sight'. For a brief discussion of Benjamin's relation to Metz, see Bernhard Wunder, *Konstruktion und Rezeption der Theologie Walter Benjamins: These I und das Theologisch-Politische Fragment*. Epistemata, Würzburger Wissenschaftliche Schriften Band 223 (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1997), 41-44.

² Ibid., 7.

³ Ibid., 9.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵ Ibid., 9.

⁶ The concept of the real 'openness' of history is central to Metz more in-depth study *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980).

⁷ 'The Future in the Memory of Suffering', 10.

⁸ Metz advocated a revising of Christian theology in light of the Auschwitz and the sufferings of Jews. He argued that Christians can only confess and testify to God together with Jews since the God-question cannot be thought without the historical experience of the Shoah, and spiritual experience of the Jews in the death camps. For a full discussion, see Johann-Baptist Metz, 'Facing the Jews: Christian Theology After Auschwitz', in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and David Tracy (eds.), *The Holocaust as Interruption*. Concilium: Religion in the Eighties (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983), 26-33. In this text, Metz criticises Moltmann and Sölle for their appropriation of Jewish stories of suffering, like the ones found in the writings of Elie Wiesel (pp. 29-30). He also states quite poignantly and provocatively that 'We can pray after Auschwitz, because there were prayers in Auschwitz' (p. 29).

⁹ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics IV: The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, trans. Brian McNeil et al (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), , 101-154.

¹⁰ The particular strength of Balthasar's treatment of Greek tragedy is that he seeks to emphasize the difference and uniqueness of each of the tragedians he discusses, rather than homogenizing them under a general rubric of 'Greek tragedy'.

tragedy is the epitome and climax of Greek art, with Greek artistic endeavours collapsing thereafter.¹ In fact, Balthasar goes as far as to say that after Sophocles and Euripides, Greek tragedy could never reach the same heights again.² Within this chapter, Balthasar aims to place the Greek tragedians under the category of 'glory' in which 'the divine presence is announced in heightened suffering'³ which manifests itself within absence and concealment: 'if the glory of God is only ever concealed, then it is the glory of the agonised heart which finally prevails, of a heart which endures more than ever could be expected of it'⁴. Obviously the kind of god pictured here is a rather malicious god who consigns the tragic hero to a certain fate rather whimsically and arbitrarily, against which the tragic hero has to assert himself or herself.⁵ Balthasar clearly acknowledges the religious backdrop for tragedy, fully aware of the regular assertion that its origins lie in the Dionysian rituals and festivals⁶. He even suggests that 'tragedy' has a 'glory' that is comparable to 'the quality of sacramentality' which (as he beautifully puts it), points towards 'the present situation', 'the tragic situation' which 'remains a knot that cannot be loosed, where the solution cannot be sought beyond it, only within'. He writes that tragedies do 'indeed signify something but not that which is other. They point to their own fullness and depth. They are not only symbolic, but also that which is symbolised. They point to something (which embraces a mode of absence), because they are at the same time full of an abundant presence'.⁷ Throughout Balthasar's study of tragedy, one can find some wonderful theological commentaries on Aeschylus (regarding grace and revelation)⁸, Sophocles (regarding negative theology and divine absence)⁹, and Euripides (regarding suffering, death and contradiction).¹⁰ Important for our purposes, however, is how Balthasar relates tragedy to Christian theology. Balthasar states that it was 'Greek tragedy, and not Greek philosophy, with which the Christians primarily entered into dialogue' since it formed 'the great, valid cypher of the Christ event'. However, 'The absolute gravity of great tragedy, together with its understanding of glory, directly enters and is so subsumed by the drama of Christ that, after Christ, it cannot be repeated'.¹¹ He goes on to say that there is 'no possibility of creating and staging a tragedy in the highest sense after Christ, who has performed this role to its perfection. The glory of tragedy is absorbed into the glory of the *Kyrios*'.¹² It is here that the 'Christomonist' tendency in the Barthian legacy comes to the fore, along with its proclivity towards 'exclusive substitution' rather than 'inclusive representation'.¹³ In this regard, furthermore, as Ben Quash has argued, even though Balthasar aims to construct a truly 'dramatic' understanding of history (one that is open, contingent and 'unframeable') he often tends toward an 'epic' interpretation (in the Hegelian sense) of certain stories and texts, which tends

¹ Ibid., 101.

² Ibid., 101, 131-133. It should be said here that Balthasar is simply repeating a sentiment that has been echoed from Hegel's reflections on tragedy. For more on this, Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek*, 110-138.

³ Ibid., 106.

⁴ Ibid., 107.

⁵ Ibid., 102-103; 112-113.

⁶ Ibid., 102. This thesis has been placed in doubt by the work of Gerald Else (amongst others). Else argues that the origins of tragedy likely stem from more 'secular' motives, related to the socio-political contexts of Athenic literary creation.

⁷ Ibid., 106.

⁸ Ibid., 120-121.

⁹ Ibid., 122-131.

¹⁰ Ibid., 131-154.

¹¹ Ibid., 101.

¹² Ibid., 104.

¹³ For a critique of Balthasar along similar lines, see Kevin Taylor, 'Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Christ the Tragic Hero', in *Christian Theology and Tragedy*, 133-147.

towards grand encompassing themes and systems that are unable to deal with the more 'lyrical' and 'dramatic' elements of tragedy.¹ In fact – turning Barth against Balthasar – Quash argues that Balthasar is sometimes even more 'epic' than Barth in his interpretation of the God-world relation², and of certain biblical texts (e.g. Job)³. So while Balthasar's presentation and exposition of Greek tragedy deserves to be taken seriously, we need to seriously question his assumption that Christ overcomes and 'absorbs' all other 'tragedy' so that tragedy is not repeatable after the passion of Christ.

Furthermore, though we cannot engage in detail with this possibility, it should be mentioned as a side note that regardless of the merits of Balthasar's analysis of these ancient texts, we should practice (at a minimum) a reasonable hermeneutics of suspicion regarding Balthasar's preference (ideologically-speaking) for pre-modern texts (including Greek tragedy). As Paul Silas Peterson⁴ has shown (along with others), some of Balthasar's early writings evince anti-modernistic, and even a nationalistic, anti-Semitic tendency. Even though these traits might not be as marked in his later writings, we need to keep these possible undertones in mind as we examine his later writings.

Within the British context, we encounter an affirmation of 'the tragic' in the Anglo-German theologian Ulrich Simon, namely, in his contribution to a post-Auschwitz theology. He writes that

'Auschwitz compels us to incorporate the tragic reality in the redemptive process. Resurrection is not the easy way out, but the validation of the tragic itself. This is not new to a religion which portrays the Risen One with wounds in hands and feet and side. Resurrection does not obliterate the marks of tragedy but translates them from the level of passing *incident* to that eternal worth. Auschwitz is not overcome by tragic resignation but by victory over impersonal and meaningless torment in personal love'.⁵

He goes on to say that while the 'climax of the resurrection stands beyond tragedy' since it requires 'the transcendence of self-interest', it involves suffering since all 'self-transcendence' involves a 'tragic' element (Simon references Tillich's concept of tragic greatness here). As such, Auschwitz loses its isolation because he has raised Christ from the dead.⁶ Simon does not go into much detail in relation to what he means by 'tragedy' but he seems to be referring to 'tragedy' mainly as an *empirical experience* within history, rather than building on any tragic mythology, since for Simon Auschwitz causes us to 'abandon everything remotely connected with mythology' because we must 'see and comprehend the conflict in its factual light'.⁷ Since Simon does not engage in more detail with the tragic, we will not go further, except to say that, within the spectrum of different responses to the

¹ Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005), 137-155.

² Balthasar accused Barth's early theology of tending towards 'monergism', thereby effacing the reality of the creature. However, Quash argues that Balthasar himself tends (sometimes) towards a 'monergistic' theology of the God-world relation. For more on this, see Quash, *Ibid.*, 156-162.

³ He compares Barth and Balthasar's interpretation of the Book of Job, and he finds that Barth's interpretation is more open to a 'dramatic' reading than Balthasar's.

⁴ Paul Silas Peterson, 'Anti-Modernism and Anti-Semitism in Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele*'. *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 52.3 (2010), 302-318. It could also be mentioned here that these insights should give pause to those who enthusiastically embrace Balthasar as a counter-modernity thinker (against other Catholic modernists like Karl Rahner).

⁵ Ulrich E. Simon, *A Theology of Auschwitz* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1967), 101.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

tragic within theology, Simon seems to occupy theology as *paradoxically tragic* rather than simply *post-tragic*.

Dietrich Ritschl engages in a brief treatment of 'the tragic' within the context of Christology¹, and he seems resistant to any effacing of the problem of suffering.² He says that the suffering of Christ cannot be understood as 'tragedy' if 'tragedy' means 'a hopelessness without a future', but he nonetheless admits that 'the world is full of tragedy in precisely this sense of the word' so that no 'tragic element' can be said to be 'finally done away with and overcome by the death and resurrection of Jesus'. Ritschl certainly acknowledges that death as 'a punishment and separation from God' has been overcome, but this does undermine 'the dimension of irreversibility and thus *de facto* hopelessness' which the experience of the tragic implies, although 'the Christian understanding of tragedy differs from the Greek in the freedom to accept forgiveness'.³ In response to tragedy, Ritschl suggests two possible responses: firstly, in light of the coming of Christ and the belief that 'the tragic' is not something willed by God (thereby accepting that there might be 'no possibility of reinterpreting tragedy') believers can at least 'offer meaningful and constructive interpretation of what opportunities are nevertheless now evident', even though they should not attempt to 'make sense' of events like Auschwitz but should rather 'seek the meaning of the future, even if should consist in accepting hopelessness'. Secondly, Ritschl suggests an account of divine providence in which the Triune God is engaged in responding to and 'interpreting' the world, as understood in the light of 'God's sharing in Israel's suffering and his presence in Jesus, in any form of the tragic'.⁴ Again, like Simon, Ritschl does not engage much with tragic theory, but he does seem to presuppose Greek tragedy as a fundamental referent for our understanding of tragedy, even though he does reference a 'Christian understanding of tragedy' that is different from its Greek counterpart. Taking these factors into account, it would seem that Ritschl falls within the spectrum of theology as *tragic* or at least as *paradoxically tragic*.

Other German theologians like Jürgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jüngel have not engaged too much with tragic theory or the theme of tragedy per se, but what they have written bears some comment. Since both of these thinkers are contemporary acolytes of theopaschite or staurocentric theories of the Trinity in which suffering and death are not excluded from the divine life, and the classical doctrines of impassibility are rejected in favour of the compassionate, suffering love of God, it would seem that their theological projects would be amenable to a *tragic* or *paradoxically tragic* theology (obviously depending on how 'tragedy' is being understood). Moltmann makes few explicit references to tragedy; there are some brief allusions in *The Crucified God* to Greek myth and tragedy in his discussion of human freedom⁵, divine *apatheia*⁶, and the law of parricide in Freud⁷. However, no

¹ Dietrich Ritschl, *The Logic of Theology: A Brief Account of the Relationship between Basic Concepts in Theology*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 192-196. It should be said here that Ritschl makes mention of Donald MacKinnon (p. 193) in this regard, and he seems to be influential on this point for Ritschl.

² In this regard, Ritschl has famously said (*The Logic of Theology*, 38) that 'Anyone who wants to say that Auschwitz – as paradigm of evil and suffering in our time – is willed by God or good, even if we only realise it late, has to shut up, because such statements mark the end of both theology and humanity'.

³ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 195-196.

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1974), 221-22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 267-268.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 303-307.

detailed treatment of tragedy per se is to be found here, though one could argue the entire of theme of Godforsakenness and the 'negativity' of the cross falls under the rubric of tragedy's own 'negative dialectic' (as Larry Bouchard argues).¹ In *God in Creation*, we find a brief reference to the tragic quality of creation that is subject to 'futility'.² He also makes mention of tragedy in reference to the work of Miguel de Unamuno while discussing the Spanish mystical idea of 'the sorrow of God' (*congoja*).³ However, Moltmann's most detailed discussion of tragedy is in reference to the work of the Russian mystical philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev.⁴ Here Moltmann seems to approve of the idea a 'tragedy in God' in which God struggles for freedom within time so that 'the tragedy of human history is God's own tragedy too.'⁵ We will not engage in a detailed critique of this position, which (besides presupposing 'social doctrine of the Trinity' and all its consequential problems⁶) articulates a very strong relation between the dramas and contingencies of history and the internal life of the Triune God. I will only say that if such a 'historical' drama is made internal to the life of God (with all its concomitant horror, suffering and evil) then are not 'suffering', 'tragedy' and 'evil' made 'necessary' since they are part of God's being?⁷ One cannot arbitrarily divide history into parts, saying God identifies with 'the good bits' while leaving out all the more objectionable bits: if God 'identifies' Godself with a certain portion in history, then where does the regression stop? In this schema, is it not the case that God can only be exempted from the 'evil' of history when 'history' is understood in a very unhistorical manner?

Jüngel does not mention tragedy in a significant way in his writings; however, if we take into account what he says, in his reflections on death and the resurrection (in a phrase that echoes the sentiments of other theologians like Barth, Moltmann, and Rahner)⁸, that 'the Christian resurrection hope should not be allowed to obscure the fact that this human life of ours is temporally limited. Although it has been frequently has been and will be interpreted in this way, the hope of the resurrection cannot involve the expectation that life's temporal limitations will be dissolved'. This is because 'any dissolution of the temporal boundaries of human life would involve the dissolution of

¹ Bouchard, *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology*, 229-234; 250-251.

² Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation – The Gifford Lectures 1984-1985*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1985), 68: 'The unredeemed character of the body which believers sense in themselves corresponds to the tragedy of non-human creation, which is subject to futility. Nature has fallen victim to transience and death. It has not fallen through its own sin, like human beings. To talk about 'a fallen nature' is therefore highly dubious. And yet a sadness lies over nature which is the expression of its tragic fate and its messianic yearning. It is enslaved and wishes to be free, for it is transitory and wishes for 'an abiding habitation'.

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1981), 36-42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 42-47.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 42: 'History exists because man is free. But because man continually misuses and suppresses his freedom, human history is a tragedy. It is a tragedy of freedom, not a tragedy of doom. Because God himself wants man to be free, the tragedy of human history is God's own tragedy too. God desires the freedom of his image on earth, and yet cannot force freedom on him; he can only create it and preserve it through the suffering of his eternal love. Consequently the history of man's freedom is simply the side of the history of God's passion which is open to our experience and perception. God's suffering stands at the centre only because God wants freedom.'

⁶ Such a model has been criticized for its tendency towards tritheism, and for its modelling of the divine persons on modern egalitarian subjects. On this point, in an interview with David Cunningham ('Living the Questions: The Converging Worlds of Rowan Williams', *Christian Century* 119.2 (2002), 26) Williams says that he has been tempted to use the model of the 'social Trinity'. He says 'When I first started thinking about it I was very taken with the whole "social Trinity" model—God as, by definition, a communion of persons in relation—the Trinity as the perfect social structure, a model society. It seemed a wonderfully apt analogy. But in trying to think through that and to live with it, I find that I've got to rein in the urge to use it. The idea of the social Trinity is crying out, "Use me, use me!" And I have to say, "No, no. That's too easy, too fast."'

⁷ David Bentley Hart lodges such a criticism against Robert Jenson's theology of the economic Trinity in *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 155-167

⁸ For more reflections on a concept of 'eternal life' that does not efface the limitations of earthly life and death (which also brings into conversation several significant figures within German theology) see Nicholas Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), 164-180.

human personality'.¹ And when one combines this with Jüngel's dictum that God is 'the unity of life and death in favour of life'² we have an understanding of God that is trying to give dignity to temporality, while at the same acknowledging God's power for live enhancement within the historical world.³ No doubt it is possible to critique Jüngel on some of the same points that we can critique Moltmann (though I do think Jüngel is a little more nuanced than Moltmann on this score). Nonetheless, since Jüngel does not discuss tragedy per se in detail, we will not spend further space on him here.

Returning to the Anglo-American world of theology, it should be said Donald MacKinnon remains the most significant theologian of the tragic within the English-speaking world. More than any other theologian in his time, he sought to emphasise 'tragedy' as a category that Christian theology had to take seriously. However, since he is a very important thinker for Rowan Williams' early development, we have left our discussion of him to a later chapter.⁴

Regarding MacKinnon's student Nicholas Lash, it can be seen that he takes tragedy seriously as an important task for Christian theology, and his emphasis on the problem of contingency and history in relation to theological hermeneutics bears this out.⁵ We can also see in his discussions on Marxism, in relation to the theme of Christian eschatology, that he seeks to place Christian hope between optimism and despair, a hope that is able to take account of the tragic: 'Hope, as one form of expression of the tragic vision is more *reticent* [than optimism and despair]. The mood of its discourse is less that of assertion and prediction than of interrogation and request.'⁶ Furthermore, Lash's reflections on the theme of death and eternal life, whereby the resurrection does not cancel out the limitations and dignity of temporal life, provide an interesting comparison for Eliot's and Williams' concern for taking time seriously, not nullifying it eschatologically.⁷

Stanley Hauerwas⁸ has dealt with the theme of tragedy within the context of ethics (particularly focusing on the realm of medicine). Hauerwas aims to construct an ethics based on narrative rather than just instrumental reason, believing that the modern tendency towards efficiency and a rationality developed apart from stories leads to an ethic or morality that is 'no one's in particular', and also tends to obviate that which cannot be instrumentalised or removed, namely the reality of moral

¹ Eberhard Jüngel, *Death: The Riddle and the Mystery*, trans. Iain and Ute Nicol (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 119.

² Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 184-225.

³ Since Jüngel holds onto a strong correlation between the economic and immanent trinity, one could argue that Jüngel (like Moltmann and Jenson) is in danger of identifying God's life *ad intra* with God's life *ad extra*. While this always remains a danger for those who seek to relate immanent and the economic trinity in a stringent sense, Jüngel does attempt to distinguish them. For him, the 'immanent trinity' is 'the summarizing concept' (a Hegelian phrase) of 'God's history with man' (*God as the Mystery of the World*, 346.), arguing that (Ibid., 346-347) the economic Trinity refers to 'God's history with man' while immanent Trinity refers to 'God's historicity.' For Jüngel, 'God's history is his coming to man. God's historicity is God's being as it comes (being in coming). Elsewhere in this book, he speaks about the identity of the immanent and economic trinity as 'paradox' in the same way that love is paradoxically 'selflessness' amidst a greater 'self-relatedness', a joining together or *agapē* and *eros* (Ibid. 369). Furthermore, Jüngel's has a very nuanced and novel account of analogy (the so-called 'analogy of advent', of God's coming to the world) which does allow for an 'analogical' interval between God and creation in which the *major dissimilitudo* is maintained within the context of an even greater *major similitudo*, so that 'worldly obviousness' is made to speak for something 'even more obvious' in light of God's identification with the crucified, dead, and risen Jesus Christ (Ibid., 181-198).

⁴ See chapter three, where we create the context for Williams' lectures on the *Four Quartets*.

⁵ For an exemplary collection in this regard, see Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*.

⁶ *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, 208.

⁷ Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach*, 164-180.

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas (with Richard Bondi and David B. Burrell), *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations into Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1977).

tragedy.¹ For Hauerwas, moral tragedy involves willing lesser evil within a moral act²; here, he uses the paradigmatic example of the medical profession as a place where moral tragedy often occurs, where sometimes the only choice is ‘between wrong and wrong’.³ It should also be mentioned here that Hauerwas is aware of the difficulty of defining ‘tragedy’ (“tragedy” has no one meaning)⁴, and he is also conscious of distinguishing ‘accidents, unfortunate events, and tragedy’ by ‘seeing how certain “events” fit into a narrative context’, thereby allowing one to make the right distinctions between these different categories.⁵ Based on these statements (as well as some to be found elsewhere)⁶, along with the trajectory to be found in the work of his doctoral student David Toole, it could be said that Hauerwas most likely lies within the spectrum of a *tragic* or *paradoxically* tragic theology.

One of the most significant treatments of tragedy in relation to theology that has appeared in recent times is Larry Bouchard’s *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology: Evil in Contemporary Drama and Religious Thought*. Larry Bouchard attempts to develop a very precise account of the relation between theology and tragedy, both from a literary and existential perspective.⁷ Bouchard summarises the content of his argument in the following way: ‘The literary theme of this book may be stated in a single clause: tragedy is a method of inquiry into the tragic. The religious theme is suggested by a single proposition: theology that reads well the art of tragedy must discover itself blinded by thoughts of theodicy.’⁸ He defines tragedy as ‘an *aesthetic method of disclosure and inquiry* that interprets and criticizes various sorts of actions and characters, and worlds *wherein evil is experienced as a problem for thought*.’⁹ For Bouchard ‘tragedies’ (as art form and experience) reveal ‘the tragic’ (as analogy).¹⁰ Following the work of Paul Ricoeur, Bouchard seeks to extract several themes from Greek tragedy (pride, delusion, the wicked god, etc.)¹¹, thereafter using them as a heuristic for interpreting various Christian thinkers (Augustine, Niebuhr, Barth, and Tillich)¹². The centre of the book consists of an analysis of three literary figures (Rolf Hochhuth, Robert Lowell and Peter Shaffer) who bring together tragic and theological themes into their work.¹³ In the final chapter, Bouchard seeks to understand tragedy under the rubric of an ‘ontology’, a ‘negative dialectics’¹⁴, or more specifically, ‘a negative dialectic of culture.’¹⁵ As such, tragedy is a form of cultural criticism and

¹ On this, see his treatment of ‘the standard account’ of rationality, in *ibid.*, 15-39.

² *Ibid.*, 222n.

³ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 243n.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, ‘Why Time Cannot and Should Not Heal the Wounds of History, But Time Has Been and Can Be Redeemed’, which can be found in Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2000), 139-154.

⁷ From reading Bouchard’s work, one can see that he stands within the tradition of ‘correlation’ theology (e.g. Tillich, Tracy, Gilkey, etc.) in which ‘theology’ and ‘culture’ are seen to be mutually enlightening enterprises. Furthermore, one can see that he also has influenced strongly by hermeneutical philosophy, like we see exemplified in Paul Ricoeur.

⁸ *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology*, 1. For Bouchard, “all the artistic forms called tragedy expose the errors of various theodicies” (*Ibid.*, 2).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰ As Bouchard says (*Ibid.*, 224), ‘analogies give...order to a critical framework’ but ‘analogues distort if they are not kept tense with particularity’.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10-48. It should be said here that although Bouchard draws on these themes, he does not do so without engaging in some appropriate demythologisation of them (e.g. his equation of ‘negativity’ with ‘malevolent transcendence’ of ‘the wicked god’).

¹² *Ibid.*, 49-84.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 95-215.

¹⁴ Bouchard references the work of Adorno, Booth and Derrida in this regard. He defines ‘negative dialectics’ as expounding “nonidentity” of thought and reality’ (*Ibid.*, 219).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 228.

a praxis-orientated¹ interpretation² that awakens us to the reality of 'negativity' or 'malevolent transcendence' in the forms of evil and human suffering. Such negative dialectics aims to uncover 'the limits of finitude and the limits of fault, which may defeat or displace any thoughtful claim to "to know the whole"'. Furthermore, such a praxis always returns to 'real negativity' in order that 'facile illusions may be exposed' - not just a 'negativity-in-principle but by particular encounters or specific insights into negativity that call thinking into critical judgement.'³ Such an exposure to 'real negativity' for theology can occur as it thinks and wrestles with its own traditional resources ('intramural relations')⁴ and with occurrences of human culture and history that are not limited to Christianity's own internal resources ('extramural relations').⁵ However, it must continue to remain focused on the particular form that 'tragedies' take, and it is because of this experience that we can continue to make analogies regarding 'the tragic as an existential or religious dimension'⁶. For Bouchard, 'tragedies' continue to remain 'irreducible'; however Bouchard says that this 'irreducibility' can be understood in two ways. We can understand tragedy under the category of 'ultimacy' (which 'connotes our existential orientation to the limits of our own reality and the world') or 'finality' (which 'connotes what lies beyond those limits, beyond the ultimate horizon, which may be expressed symbolically but not propositionally'). He uses David Tracy's distinction between 'limit-to' (ultimacy) and 'limit-of' (finality) to express this difference between these two words. For Bouchard, tragedy-as-ultimacy implies that within our horizon of thought, tragedy cannot find resolution or reduction, while tragedy-as-finality implies that 'everything is tragic'. The problem with tragedy-as-finality is that if everything is tragic then, in a sense, *no-thing* is tragic because *every-thing* is tragic.⁷ As such, a tragic worldview is affirmed at the cost of losing the multiplicity and particularity of individual tragedies. However, even though Bouchard leans towards accepting tragedy-as-ultimate, he is resistant towards deciding between the two, arguing that it is this undecidability that forms part of the risk of real tragedy, it is a part of its 'data'. He says that 'The irreducibility of the tragic...is limned by ultimacy and finality'⁸, that it 'oscillates' between 'the discernments of ultimacy and finality'.⁹ This is part of the symbolic function and difficulty of 'tragedies', and analogically speaking, 'the tragic'.¹⁰ After this discussion, he ends the book through some theses on the cross, making use of the lenses of tragic theory.¹¹

Evaluating Bouchard's important book, it can be said that he has made some advancement in the discussion between tragedy and theology. His attention to the particularity of the tragic, without

¹ Following critical theorists, he argues for 'the primacy of praxis informing theory' (Ibid., 222).

² Bouchard says that 'The tragic is given in the act of human interpretation' (Ibid., 244).

³ Ibid., 223-224

⁴ Bouchard's references here (Ibid., 229-234) the way the theology of the cross has been expounded by figures like Moltmann and Metz.

⁵ Ibid., 234-243. Here he references the human experience of contingency (in reference to the work of James Gustafson) and the death camps (in reference to the work of Richard Rubenstein).

⁶ Ibid., 244.

⁷ 'To say that the tragic is final would be to say that everything is tragic, that being-itself has the essential character of evil-as-a-problem-for-thought, that God *is* evil. To so predicate the tragic with finality is incoherent. Not only would a totalization of the tragic be propositionally meaningless, but it would foreclose the interpretative and heuristic character of the tragic in art and life' (Ibid., 246)...'The tragic can be *conceived* as ultimate but not as final (Ibid., 247)'.⁸

⁸ Ibid., 247.

⁹ Ibid., 248.

¹⁰ Bouchard wonders whether events like Hiroshima and the Shoah can really be classified as tragedies rather than just 'events, brutal facts, of such enormity as commonly to provoke the sense that they are different from ordinary events, beyond the grasp of reason' but then backtracks a little by saying that maybe these events change the way we perceive what 'tragedy' or 'the tragic' even means, and writes that 'there has never been much warrant for demanding that tragedies comport to sacrosanct formulas' (Ibid., 249).

¹¹ Ibid., 250-251.

seeking to circumscribe too restrictively the realm of 'tragedy' or 'the tragic', coheres with the aims of this thesis. Furthermore, his distinction between tragedy-as-ultimate and tragedy-as-finality will be important to keep in mind as we go on further. And, while Bouchard does seem to prioritise the primordial experience of Greek tragedy, he moves beyond it through appropriate demythologisation and by examining modern works of tragedy. However, we will distance ourselves from his reflections on tragedy's 'ontological' dimension.

Wendy Farley has also engaged with tragedy in her book *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy*. The aim of her book is to expound a practical theodicy centred on compassion, rather than finding a solution to the problem of evil. She defines the elements of tragedy as suffering, the problem of freedom, resistance, finitude, and compassion.¹ Farley argues that tragedy is not inherently fatalistic or necessarily pessimistic but rather contains resources for resistance (e.g. Prometheus)² and compassion in response to the realities of evil in the world (her study particularly focuses on divine compassion).³ Farley's focus on a practical theodicy and compassion in relation to the tragic is worth bearing in mind as we continue in our study of Williams. However, since Farley limits her understanding of the tragic largely to Greek tragedy, we will need to develop a tragic theology which is more inclusive regarding what the term 'tragedy' implies and consists of.

Some other feminist theologians have also dealt with the theme of the tragic. Kathleen Sands has authored a provocative study entitled *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology*. We will discuss Sands a bit more in a later chapter⁴, but it can be said here that her contribution to tragic theory is suspicious regarding any idea of a transcendent, metaphysical 'Good' as bequeathed to theology through the classical Augustinian tradition. She dubs such a position 'moral dualism'⁵ since it tries to assert a good that is separate from the entanglements of time and tragedy. For Sands, there is no ethical action that is devoid of the potential for evil and tragic consequences. As such, the good is something radically contingent and non-metaphysical, and therefore can be classified as an 'immanent good' rather than a 'transcendent' one.⁶ This requires us (and especially women in Sands case) to acknowledge 'the *absence* of a limitless and transcendent good' and thereby 'take responsibility for sin and grace into [our] own hands'.⁷ We will not go into a detailed critique here of this position (Williams will provide that later in this thesis), but we will say here that while we cannot separate the Good from its entanglements in time and the possibility of tragic consequences (MacKinnon and Williams say similar things in this regard), Sands' rejection of any transcendent Good (and a 'metaphysical' God along with it) makes it difficult to understand how we can understand, conceive, or even recognise the Good if there is no continuity of 'the Good' between the different immanent contexts we find ourselves in. If the Good is understood in this radically contingent manner, not seen as more fundamental than evil (Sands rejects the Augustinian *privatio boni*), and if tragedy is

¹ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 19-39.

² *Ibid.*, 27-29.

³ *Ibid.*, 115ff.

⁴ See chapter 5.

⁵ Kathleen M. Sands, *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 17-36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 43-54.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

viewed to be so radically pervasive in everything, then how (as Bouchard says) can we even recognise 'tragedy' to begin with? Does not Sands position lead us not only to a moral nominalism, but a 'nominalism' of 'tragedy' and 'the tragic' as well?

The Armenian-American theologian Flora Keshgegian follows in Sands footsteps regarding her critique of moral dualism, but does not expand this theme to the same length as Sands. Her emphasis on tragedy and trauma comes within the context of her discussion of hope. Such a focus on tragedy allows her to develop a chastened idea of hope that is not too certain or optimistic that the future will turn out the way we want or desire, but that we continue to hold to an 'ethics of risk' (following Sharon Welch) and a 'tragic hope' that acknowledges the limits and uncertainties of living as finite beings.¹ Since Keshgegian's account of moral dualism is not as radical as Sands' treatment, we cannot reproduce our criticisms of Sands given above (though it is difficult to tell since she does not expand much on what *she* exactly means by 'moral dualism'). Nonetheless, Keshgegian's account of a Christian understanding of hope that does not move simplistically beyond tragedy should be kept in mind as we continue.

David Toole has also authored a book entitled *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse*, focusing on how tragedy and apocalypse might provide us with options for moving beyond the nihilism and the experience of meaninglessness. The metaphorical backdrop for this study is the story of Susan Sontag's production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, within the war-torn surroundings of the Bosnian ethnic conflict.² Through an examination of the works of Nietzsche (who Toole interprets in a more positive light), John Milbank, Michel Foucault, and John Howard Yoder, he seeks to articulate 'metaphysic of the tragic'³ as well as a 'tragic politics'⁴ combined with reflections on the idea of the apocalyptic⁵ to articulate an idea of Christian socio-political engagement that is open both to tragedy and apocalypse, which while hopeful is unable to decide ultimately between tragedy and apocalypse. Toole's advocacy of a hopeful politics that is willing to act (despite possible failure), and his belief that 'tragedy' as an art-form is able to create stories that are emplotted within a meaningful context (against nihilism) are helpful for our purposes in this thesis.

There are several other theologians who we could deal with, but for lack of space are unable to deal with in more detail. Some of these thinkers include J.F. Worthen⁶, Anthony Cane⁷, David Ford⁸, Ben Quash⁹, Charles Mathewes¹⁰, Graham Ward¹¹, Paul Janz¹², Allen Verhey¹, Reinhold Bernhardt², Cyprian Krause³, and Kenneth Surin⁴, amongst others.

¹ Flora A Keshgegian, *Time for Hope: Practices for Living in Today's World* (New York-London: Continuum, 2006), 96-127.

² *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse*, 1-21.

³ *Ibid.*, 89-128.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 129-204.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 205-266.

⁶ J.F. Worthen, 'Christianity and the Limits of Tragedy'. *New Blackfriars* 70.825 (1989), 109-117.

⁷ Anthony Cane, 'Ontology, Theodicy and Idiom – The Challenge of Nietzschean Tragedy to Christian Writing on Evil'. *New Blackfriars* 77.901 (1996), 84-97.

⁸ Ford, 'Tragedy and Atonement', in Surin, *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy*, 117-130.

⁹ Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, 85-118; Quash, 'Christianity as Hyper-Tragic', in Christopher Hamilton, Otto Neumaier, Gottfried Schweiger and Clemens Sedmak (eds.), *Facing Tragedies. Perspectives on Social Ethics*, vol. 2 (Wien-Berlin-Münster: LIT Verlag, 2009), 77-88.

¹⁰ Charles T. Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 25-30.

¹¹ See Ward, 'Tragedy as Subclause', Ward, 'Steiner and Eagleton', and Ward, 'Philosophy as Tragedy or What Words Won't Give'. *Modern Theology* 27.3(2011), 478-496.

¹² *God, the Mind's Desire*, 171-175. We have already referenced Janz in this paper, and we will do so again.

In the remainder of this section however, I would like to deal with David Bentley Hart's criticisms of 'tragic theology', which can be found in *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, in a section entitled 'The Consolations of Tragedy, the Terrors of Easter'.⁵ Amongst the rather verbose 'rhetoric' of Hart's critique of 'tragic theology', three salient points of criticism emerge: Firstly, the cultic and ritual context of Attic tragedy implies 'a sacrificial logic of totality' whereby the social violence exhibited in the suffering of the tragic hero is justified as an attempt to ward off the cosmic violence from the chthonic realm of the gods.⁶ Such a philosophy justifies the status quo rather than providing liberation from the cycle of violence. Secondly, Attic tragedy, according to Hart, presupposes a tragic necessity to evil that humanity and even the gods are bound to. For Hart (and for classical Christian theology) such a move dehistoricises evil and turns it into an ontological positive entity, rather than something inherently parasitic and privative.⁷ By turning evil into some kind of metaphysical necessity, human suffering becomes part of the ontological fabric of reality, thereby undermining the horrendous, punctiliar and real tragic quality of evil events, like Auschwitz. Thirdly, any attempt to read the gospel and the cross through the lenses tragedy will only ultimately distort the radically new and irruptive quality of the resurrection, since tragedy does not bring about any eschatological novelty, but simply more of the same.⁸ Amongst these main criticisms, there are some other rather rhapsodic tirades against tragic theology, but the three points mentioned are the main points that I will respond to, since they are the most central.

Firstly, Hart's fundamental assumption regarding tragic theology is that it is predicated upon the themes and perspective of Attic tragedy. I will not enter into a critique Hart's interpretation of Greek tragedy since others have done that⁹, nor will I contest in detail his presupposed 'religious' backdrop for Attic tragedy (a common belief that has been questioned by Gerald Else¹⁰), nor the complex relation between Greek myth and *de facto* religious belief.¹¹ For the purposes of my critique I will assume his interpretation is correct. I will assume (for the sake of the argument) that if 'tragic theology' is based upon the kind of theology exemplified in the Greek tragedians (as interpreted by Hart) then the project of 'tragic theology' will be problematic. However, as we have shown by

¹ Allen Verhey, 'Manager and Therapist as Tragic Heroes: Some Observations of a Theologian At a Psychiatric Hospital'. *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21.7 (2008), 7-25.

² Reinhold Bernhardt, 'Die Erfahrung des Tragischen als Herausforderung für Theologie. Versuch zur Theodizee'. *Theologische Zeitschrift* 59 (2003), 248-270.

³ Cyprian Krause, 'Ist Christentum Tragisch? Die Bakchen des Euripides als Laboratorium metatragischer Stellvertretung: eine Hermeneutik zwischen Mysterium und Metapher.' *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 103 (2006), 206-252.

⁴ See Kenneth Surin, 'Some Aspects of the 'Grammar' of Incarnation' and 'Kenosis': Reflections Prompted by the Writings of Donald MacKinnon', in *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy*, 93-116; *The Turnings of Darkness and Light: Essays in Philosophical and Systematic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 57-135; Surin, 'Theology and Marxism: The Tragic and the Tragi-Comic'. *Literature & Theology* 19.2 (2005), 112-131.

⁵ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 373-394.

⁶ 'Tragedy might well represent the most pronounced instance in Greek religion of that mystification of violence that sustains the sacred order of pagan society, the consecration of social violence as a restraint of cosmic violence, natural and divine' (Ibid., 384).

⁷ '...Christianity proves resistant to a tragic reading: theology must insist upon "historicizing evil", treating it as the superscribed text of a palimpsest, obscuring the aboriginal goodness of creation' (Ibid.).

⁸ '...Theologians must not embrace [the] suggestion that the crucifixion be read as a kind of tragic drama, in the hope that tragedy's concern for the irresolvable contradictions of the particular might put theology on guard against any metaphysical solace that would ease Christian discomfort before the terror and desolation of the cross: metaphysical solace is precisely what the tragic is' (Ibid., 386).

⁹ Francesca Aran Murphy, 'David Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*: A Response'. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60.1 (2007): 80-89. Murphy states that what Hart says is 'tragedy' would be better called 'melodrama'.

¹⁰ Else, *The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy*.

¹¹ Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

examining the arguments of modern scholars of tragedy like Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton (amongst others)¹ against thinkers like George Steiner² and Paul Ricoeur (two thinkers who are primary sources for Hart's discussion of tragedy), 'tragedy' is by no means limited to the themes and perspectives of Greek tragedy, but as an analogical predication is always bound to the specific occurrences of 'tragedy' and 'the tragic'. And further, when 'tragedy' is not understood in such a narrow manner, then both 'tragedy' and 'Christianity' are by no means opposing perspectives, as was assumed by some earlier theorists of the tragic. In my estimation, it seems that Hart's rejection of 'tragic theology' is largely predicated upon believing (like Ricoeur) that the Greek experience of tragedy is fundamental for all interpretation of tragedy, and it is this assumption that is questionable. If teleology exceeds genealogy³, then the assumption of 'a sacrificial logic of totality' as a background for *all* tragic theology is rendered as a significantly problematic assumption.

Secondly, Hart argues that 'tragic theology' presupposes the metaphysical necessity of evil, something inimical to orthodox Christian belief. What Hart's analysis lacks however is a proper attention to the different meanings or nuances of the word 'necessity'. Hart assumes throughout that the word 'necessity' within the context of 'tragedy' implies the strong, metaphysically stringent kind of 'necessity', indistinguishable from fatalism. However, one could differentiate different meanings of the word 'necessity'. As we have already mentioned, one could differentiate between 'absolute necessity' and 'contingent necessity' following the scholastic distinctions between *necessitas absoluta*, and *necessitas conditionalis*.⁴ Furthermore, one could differentiate metaphysical necessity from the kind of necessity that is inherent to 'dramatic' narration (like Murphy mentions in her critique of Hart). If we can allow such distinctions, then Hart's protestations against 'tragic theology' in light of its belief in some kind of metaphysical necessity lose some of its weight. Rather, as assumed by this thesis (and Rowan Williams), one can hold onto the importance of taking serious 'the tragic' while at the same time holding onto the traditional *privatio boni*. In this light, one could understand 'necessity' in a more modest manner, in the sense that our involvement in time and finitude implies that our freedoms are curtailed, that we are subject to forces and dynamics that are beyond our control and prevention. These realities are already the stuff of potential tragedy; one does not need to buttress it with mythological musings on the Greek concept of fate or tragic heroism to make such experiences more 'tragic' than they already are.

Thirdly, in relation to Hart's rejection of interpreting the cross of Christ through the lens of tragedy⁵ because it is unable to deal with the liberation and newness of Christ's resurrection, I think some

¹ The collection of essays to be found in *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory* are a further example of a movement beyond the perceived opposition between Christian theology and tragedy.

² We have already registered the complexity of Steiner's understanding of Christianity's relation to tragedy; the fact that Hart only references *The Death of Tragedy* (an early work of Steiner's) shows that Hart's interpretation of Steiner (at least in *The Beauty of the Infinite*) needs to be nuanced and revised a little more in light of Steiner's later work.

³ I owe this phrase to Christoph Schwöbel, gleaned from a private conversation while in Tübingen.

⁴ Reinhold Bernhardt, 'Die Erfahrung des Tragischen als Herausforderung für Theologie', 268-269.

⁵ I could mention here that Hart is not opposed to using the term 'tragic' in a more general way to the story of Christ (without all the implications of Greek religion). In David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2009), he has mentioned in passing (p. 173) that 'Try as we might, we shall never really be able to see Christ's broken, humiliated, and doomed humanity as something self-evidently contemptible and ridiculous; we are instead, in a very real sense, *destined* to see it as encompassing the very mystery of our own humanity: a sublime fragility, at one tragic and magnificent, pitiable and wonderful.' It should however also be said that his rather bleak view of Greek religion and culture (including tragedy) remain intact. On this, see *Atheist Delusions*, 129-145. However, that does not mean that he is not able to identify with the pathos of Greek culture. For this, see his story 'The House of Apollo' in *The Devil and Pierre Gernet: Stories* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 64-88.

background needs to be given. It should be said that Hart has a strong antipathy towards modern attempts at revising the classical doctrine of divine impassibility or *apatheia*. Therefore, Hart rejects the projects of various modern theologians of the cross (e.g. Jüngel, Moltmann) who attempt to advocate a theology of divine suffering, or an eternalizing of the crucifixion within the divine life. In Hart's opinion, such a move ends up making evil necessary to the divine identity. In this light, Hart (following from Hart's own Orthodox sentiments) shies away from any particular emphasis on the cross itself, focusing less on Good Friday and more on Easter Sunday. From Hart's perspective, the resurrection is not an eternalizing of the cross but rather a vindication of the crucified one, who was executed by the Roman *ancien régime*. To eternalize the cross, in Hart's viewpoint, is to eternalize the forces that brought about the crucifixion, hence Hart's rejection of any 'tragic theology' which endorses the political status quo or makes the existence of evil a metaphysical 'necessity' in the stringent sense of the word.

Several things need to be said in response to this statement. I will not contest Hart's interpretation of the various theologians of the cross, but rather focus Hart's minimalizing of the cross itself.¹ Firstly, it would be interesting to see Hart's response to several passages found in the NT, particularly those found in the writings of Paul and John. One thinks here of those passages where Paul emphasises the belief that the resurrected Christ remains the crucified one (1 Cor. 1.23, 2.2, Gal. 3.1, 2. Cor. 13.4), that the cross is part of the logic of God's action and election in the world (1 Cor. 1.18ff.), part of the wisdom ordained before the ages (1 Cor. 2.6ff.), and the pattern of kenosis and servanthood to be found in Christ (Phil. 2.6-11).² In the Deutro-Pauline tradition, we find references to Paul filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions (Col. 1.24), and in the Synoptic tradition the life of discipleship is described as taking up a cross and following Jesus (Mark. 8.32). One also thinks here of the Johannine theology of exaltation whereby the cross itself (combined with the resurrection) is seen as Christ's exaltation to the right hand of the Father (John. 3.13-14, 8.28, 12.32), or the references in the book of Revelation which speak of the slaughtered Lamb being able to open up the meaning of history (Rev. 5.1-14), the Lamb who was slain before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13.8). What this concatenation of passages is meant to show is that the significance of the cross within early Christianity moves beyond merely a negative moment that is overcome in the effulgent life of the resurrection, but rather takes on a significance of its own, pointing towards the manner of God's action in the world, a narrative into which the faithful may understand their own discipleship and suffering. Such a narrative context has been used throughout the history of the Church to understand experiences of suffering. It has also been used within the ambit of Christian spirituality and mysticism to understand experiences of Godforsakenness and 'the dark night of the soul' that we find in spiritual writers like St. John of the Cross.³ All of these factors point against the minimalist space Hart gives to the theology of the cross in his account of tragic theology.

¹ For Hart's reflections on the cross and atonement, see *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 320-327.

² For a further discussion of these passages, see Udo Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 241-245.

³ It should be said here that such a spirituality of the cross does not originate with St. John, and is not the product of Latin styled mystics. Already in early monasticism we find examples like in the Letters of Ammonas (who is believed to be an acolyte of St. Antony), in which there is a bringing together of the so-called *Himmelsreise* (the ascent into heaven) with a theology of the cross, a *theologia* and *devotia crucis*. On this, see Rowan Williams, *Faith and Experience in Early Monasticism: New*

Secondly, Hart's resistance to reading the story of Christ through the lens of tragedy is only valid as long as his assumptions and interpretation of 'tragedy' and 'the tragic' remain in effect. If these assumptions are questioned then it remains an open question whether the gospel can be interpreted as tragedy, at least in part.¹ Hart's critiques of Donald MacKinnon and Nicholas Lash on this point are largely based on this point (although his critique of Lash is a little more complex)². As seems clear from Hart's argument as a whole, he is not opposed to 'tragedy' per se as an art-form, as he is not opposed to using non-Christian philosophy as a conversation partner and tool for interacting with and expounding the classical Christian tradition. What Hart contests, however, is using 'tragedy' as a lens for interpreting the gospel. But as has already been said, if Hart's rejection of 'tragic theology' and interpreting the drama of the incarnation through the perspective of 'tragedy' are wedded to his understanding of Attic tragedy, then such a thread can be cut if 'tragedy' is given a broader and more complicated meaning.

Thirdly, since Hart's adherence to a privative account of evil and divine *apatheia* are behind his rejections of 'tragic theology' and various theologies of the cross, it seems beneficial to make an important distinction (one I am sure Hart would endorse). It is one thing to say that evil *per se* is meaningless, without substance, ontology – namely, it is essentially *nothing* (as the Augustinian *privatio boni* teaches). This can be endorsed without much trouble among orthodox Christian thinkers. However, this is something completely different from saying human suffering (what Simone Weil called 'affliction') is *nothing*.³ Such a belief can only be dismissed as a monstrous fantasy; the machinations of the Nazi death camps may be the example of 'the banality of evil' (as Hannah Arendt once said controversially)⁴, but to say that the horrendous suffering of Auschwitz – as experienced subjectively by those who were there – is 'banal' displays an insensitivity almost amounting to psychopathy. Surely this is a distinction that any Augustinian theologian would want to uphold.⁵ In *The Beauty of the Infinite*, Hart is resistant to any theology of the cross in which God somehow has to 'reconcile' or come in contact with death and suffering. This is tied to his antipathy towards Hegel, and his rejection of any theopaschite theology. However, the question remains: if we are going to say that, then – somehow – we still have to account for the traditional and orthodox Judeo-Christian belief in divine *compassion*, which asserts that the pain of suffering creation is in some sense 'real' for God.

Perspectives on the Letters of Ammonas. Akademische Reden und Kolloquien der Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Band 20 (Erlangen: Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen-Nürnberg, 2002), 19-36.

¹ Cf. Worthen, 'Christianity and the Limits of Tragedy', who attempts to show that Greek tragedy is actually (in some examples of it) close to the Christian perspective of the world, and vice versa that the Christian gospel is closer to tragedy than a *prima facie* reading might suggest. Worthen also shows how even on a purely 'Augustinian' perspective, the reality of tragedy is difficult to deny.

² His critique of Lash (*The Beauty of the Infinite*, 382-390) is basically centred around what he takes to be the Hegelian implications of Lash's 'eternalizing' of the cross in which the Hegelian *theoria* (the Absolute Spirit's self-contemplation) implies an infinite return to sameness, an eternal hall of mirrors. It is precisely this reading of Hegel (if Lash is to be read within this light, since Lash does not mention Hegel once in either of the referred essays in both *Theology on Dover Beach* and *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*) that contemporary scholars of Hegel have tried to counter-act, with Gillian Rose and Rowan Williams included in this trajectory of scholars.

³ It should be mentioned here that Hart in no way should be accused of making human suffering to be really 'nothing' (cf. the eschatological perspective of someone like John Hick). Hart's writing in relation to the topic of evil and human suffering is filled with a commendable amount of pathos and intelligence, one that refuses to take human suffering (especially the suffering of children) as something divinely ordained or meaningful-in-itself. For Hart's discussion of these themes, one can read his short book entitled *The Doors of the Sea: Where was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), as well as his beautifully sombre tale 'A Voice from the Emerald World', in David Bentley Hart, *The Devil and Pierre Gernet*, 89-122.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: The Viking Press, 1963).

⁵ For a discussion of these themes, but in relation to the theology of Julian of Norwich (who was undoubtedly influenced by the Augustinian vision), see Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2011), 68-99.

Certainly, God comes from a different 'perspective' than the afflicted, so the suffering will be 'seen' in a different light. But to say that human suffering and affliction is *nothing* to God undermines a fundamental tenant of the Christian tradition (and decent humaneness). And if we are to say that God expresses and experiences a deep compassion for created being, should we not say that primary locus for such compassion is to be found in the incarnation, suffering and death of Jesus Christ? And further, does not such a narrative context (incarnation, death, resurrection) provide a particular 'representative' story into which at least *some* human suffering can be emplotted? Are not various theologies of the cross – at their best – an expression of this impetus? And lastly, does not tragedy (understood less restrictively) provide an opportunity to represent the dignity of the afflicted, the oppressed, and those who suffer (despite what Hart has to say about Greek tragedy or melodrama); and if this is so, cannot tragedy and the gospel story be brought into fruitful conversation?¹ Is there potential for both to be mutually enlightening? All of these are just some of questions I want to pose to Hart's proposal which point to the limitations of his critique against tragic theology.

John Milbank is also an important figure in relation to critiquing tragic theology. However, he is more open than Hart (it would seem) to using tragedy within his theological reflections. Since we shall discuss Milbank later when we come to his essay on Donald MacKinnon, we will not engage in a detailed treatment at this point. So with these reflections, I will bring this rather elongated section to a close, and move onto a summary of Rowan Williams own contribution.

1.5. Rowan Williams

In the concluding section of this chapter, I aim to define as best as possible Williams' own approach to tragic theology. In the process of doing so, I will also define the four motifs I am proposing for interpreting his basic approach, namely: *contingency*, *contemplation*, *compassion*, and *non-closure*.

i) Contingency

By proposing *contingency* as a motif for interpreting Williams' understanding of tragedy, I am simply attempting to expound his belief (which he shares with pretty much all classical and orthodox Christian belief) that created being is *finite* and subject to the temporal fluctuations of time.² Created being is not an *ens necessarium*, but rather something that is profoundly *contingent*; it lacks necessity, and therefore is understood primarily as ontologically gifted since its *essence* is distinct from its *existence* (as classical Christian theology as understood it). In other words, created being is temporal being. As I will show in the following chapter and the final chapter, Williams follows the teachings of Augustine in which time and the *creatio ex nihilo* are held together and are coeval. In

¹ One should mention here Richard Sturm who explicitly seeks to relate 'gospel' as a NT term, to tragedy. On this, see 'The Ancient Origin and Sense of Tragedy', 21-27.

² For some reflections on this theme, see Nicholas Lash, 'Recovering Contingency', in *Theology for Pilgrims* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 52-67. For a more detailed and poignant treatment of this theme within the context of a discussion of classical metaphysics, see David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2013), 87-151.

relation to Williams' understanding of human suffering and tragedy, the problem of time and limitation become especially important since as limited beings we are unable to extract ourselves from the upshots and vicissitudes of temporal life. The awareness of this reality occurs within the context of us living as *creatures* before God (*coram deo*): when we come to a realization of our 'absolute dependence' (to echo Schleiermacher), our undeniable limitations as created beings, this opens us to the possibility of the transcendent in the sense that whatever 'makes the world new and makes me strange to myself, forcing me to see my contingency, my participation in the world's uncontrollable flux: this is God'.¹ However, living within time means that within the development of the universe; the growth and maturation of freedom cannot happen without the reality of conflict in which the possibility of all goods being realized is suspended since limitation and finitude create a hindrance from every benevolent potential coming to fruition. Furthermore, we as creatures are not only constituted as active beings, bestowed with liberty and free self-determination, but also passive in the sense that we are dependent upon our environments and subject to the dynamics that constitute such a milieu. Such a passivity is the basis for the possibility of suffering and human tragedy, which while not *ontologically* necessary (not fatalistic or determined in the stringent sense, since human freedom is a factor that is involved) can be understood as a *contingent* necessity in the sense that time and finitude brings with it the inevitable experience of limitation, pain, loss, and suffering. Human development cannot take place without the horizon of such tragic potentialities.

ii) Contemplation

By drawing attention to *contemplation* as a motif in Williams' theology of the tragic, here I seek to make apparent the fundamentally *realist* perspective² of Williams' philosophical tendency (something he shares and inherits from his teacher Donald MacKinnon). By proposing *contemplation* as a theme, all I am aiming to do is to articulate Williams' emphasis on what can be called the 'objectivity' of the world. By using the term 'objectivity', I am using it in the very precise sense of 'objectiveness' or the 'over-againstness' (*Gegenstand* in German) of the object in relation to the subject, in order to distinguish it from a naïve positivism or reductionism. By saying this, I am articulating Williams' fundamental belief in the saturated quality of reality that continues to give itself, or the fact that it resists tidy descriptions in that it refuses to be circumscribed within the representational activities of the ego.³ I am obviously aware that the word 'contemplation' has overtones of spiritual practices and prayer (something that has importance for Williams), and so by proposing the language of a contemplative stance towards the reality of the tragic (one that keeps the difficulty of the tragic and suffering alive rather than seeking to close it down prematurely either through theodicy or fantasy), I am aware of such ambiguity nonetheless. I do want to stress, however, that such a contemplative

¹ *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1995), 102.

² Nicholas Lash has proposed in 'What Authority has our Past', in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (p. 51) that contemplation is associated with realism, and therefore with worship, whereas explanation is more associated with idealism.

³ This is not to say that Williams believes that there are 'neutral' realities 'out there' waiting to be linguistically represented; rather it, for Williams, it is precisely within the dialectic and continued discourse of language, whereby we represent, stake positions, engage, converse that we discover the silence within our speech, and the 'beyond' of speech. For more on this, see Williams' recent Gifford Lectures entitled 'Representing Reality' (4 November 2013) and 'No Last Words: Language as Unfinished Business' (7 November 2013), available from <http://www.ed.ac.uk/about/video/lecture-series/gifford-lectures>, 3/19/2014.

stance should not be understood as if the 'the tragic' were a divine reality itself to be adored or a God-ordained pedagogy in which tragedy is reduced to some kind of spiritual lesson to be contemplated for personal growth and maturation.¹ Rather, by suggesting *contemplation* as a response to tragedy, I am trying to articulate Williams' desire to let tragedy *be* tragedy rather than simply transforming it or trying to make it less difficult than it is. By using 'contemplation', I acknowledge its continuities and discontinuities with Williams' other uses of the same term². Here, however, my definition of the term is simply the movement whereby we come to terms with 'what is awkwardly and meaninglessly *there*'³ in which we allow 'what is there, and prior to us, just to be itself'⁴, which is entwined with his sense of the real *difficulty* of conceptualising reality in the sense that 'even in banal contexts, we are aware that our pigeonholes for things, people, emotions, and perceptions are often lagging well behind the fluidity of the real world, with its subtle, rapid interactions and its puzzling quality.'⁵

iii) Compassion

As far as I am aware, Williams has no thoroughly worked out concept of sympathy, empathy, or compassion. When he uses these terms, it is assumed that we know what he means by them. Obviously, there is an extensive debate on the differences between these terms, one that seeks to parse out the nuances between the different designations.⁶ For the sake of this study, I will not try to distinguish too carefully between these words since such distinctions will not really aid us in our study of Williams, who does not seem to reflect (at least in the texts I will examine) the differences between them. I am sure that Williams is aware of the debate surrounding emotional knowledge, in which feeling, emotion, judgement, and intellect cannot be easily separated,⁷ but in this study I shall not enter this debate. My reason for bringing up the concept of 'compassion' is that we find Williams using such terminology when it comes to his understanding of grasping poetic meaning within the world

¹ Williams writes (in *Faith in the Public Square*, 316) in an essay on Etty Hillesum entitled 'Religious Lives' that 'unavoidable suffering is what it is, not a stimulus to a longing for a better place or a pedagogy for moral improvement, but a datum which our humanity must humanize.'

² For example, 'Contemplation is a giving place to the prior actuality of God...Contemplation...is a deeper appropriation of the vulnerability of the self in the midst of the language and the transactions of the world' (Williams, 'Theological Integrity', in *On Christian Theology*, 11-12). It should be mentioned here however that originally, contemplation (in the Greek sense of *theoria*) included both empirical and spiritual connotations. As George Steiner has written: 'A 'theorist' or 'theoretician' is one who is disciplined in observance, a term that is itself charged with the two-fold significance of intellectual-sensory perception and religious or ritual conduct', in *Real Presences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 69. One can see this within the Neoplatonic tradition, associated with Plotinus, Proclus, Iamblichus, and Damascius, particularly in relation to its theurgic-mystical elements. For more on this, see Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), 157-171. So it is not without justification that my use of the term might inhabit that the borders of both these meanings.

³ Williams, 'The Suspicion of Suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer' [1988], in *Wrestling with Angels*, 195.

⁴ Williams, 'The Spiritual and the Religious: Is the Territory Changing?', in *Faith in the Public Square*, 92.

⁵ *A Ray of Darkness*, 99. In relation to tragedy, such a position has significant consonance with Donald MacKinnon's realistic position of 'transcendence' vis-à-vis tragedy in which tragic suffering provides an escape route from the idealistic or Kantian limitations of reason and knowledge, and provides us with a kind of 'finality' that cannot be effaced, harmonised into some greater perspective, or done away with. The difficulty continues to provoke the question. As already mentioned, the language of 'finality' here is drawn from Paul Janz (*God, the Mind's Desire*, 171-175), though it should be mentioned here that Janz's use of the term 'finality' is to be distinguished from Bouchard's use of the terms of 'ultimacy' and 'finality'. Janz's frame of discussion is different from that of Bouchard's since he is dealing with the problems of reference and realism, rather than the properly hermeneutical discussions of Bouchard. In relation to Bouchard's terms, Janz would more likely be placed with 'tragedy-as-ultimacy' than 'tragedy-as-finality'.

⁶ For more on this, Ingolf U. Dalferth and Andreas Hunziker, 'Einleitung: Aspekte des Problemkomplexes Mitleid', in Ingolf U. Dalferth, Andreas Hunziker, and Andrea Anker (eds.), *Mitleid: Konkretionen eines strittigen Konzepts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), IX-XXII.

⁷ Cf. Eberhard Hermann, 'Emotions as Part of Making Reality', in *Mitleid*, 1-17. Martha Nussbaum is been an important figure in this debate.

despite its disordered quality. For Williams, the attentive and contemplative awareness that form an important part of poetic artistry are intrinsically connected the movements and feelings related to the vulnerability and openness of compassionate practice. To attempt to see the world as it is, without fantasy or evasion, to allow reality to *show* itself, is part of the dispossession process of the spiritual life whereby we become open towards what is beyond us, and to being in all its infinity and particularity. Such a posture implies a movement outside of the self towards the other, whether that be humanity, or creation generally.¹ The relation between 'compassion' and 'tragedy' is already well-known; already from the time of Aristotle, 'compassion' (ἔλεος) was seen to be inseparable from Attic tragedy. Admittedly, the understanding of 'compassion' within Attic tragedy is different in comparison to the Christian understanding², but nonetheless if we argue (as I have been thus far) that our understanding of 'the tragic' should not be confined to Greek tragedy (as it is usually understood), but should continue to find 'family resemblances' or performative similarities between different kinds of tragedies, then our understanding of 'tragic compassion' can be fruitfully 'demythologised' and distinguished from the superstructure and architectonics of Hellenic scapegoating and the sacrificial ideology (assuming that is an adequate way to read Attic tragedy anyway, of which I have some doubts). In such an instance, we will be able to engage with empirical and literary tragedy in a way that enables us to practice and learn the art of compassion, in which the reality of the suffering other is made 'real' for us, even if the fullness of their experience remains to some extent unknown or mysterious.

iv) *The Resistance to Closure*

By making use of the language of 'closure', I am making reference to the fact that for the Williams, in relation to tragic experience, there is revealed a woundedness of being which cannot be easily sutured or remedied. The problems and difficulties presented to us in the experience of tragedy and suffering are *real* problems, and so we should be wary of any easy solutions or attempts to explain the metaphysical 'reasons' for suffering or tragedy since such explanations often seem to shipwreck against the rocks of brutal particularity. Williams continues to remain hopeful, and is not ardently pessimist or melancholic, but he nonetheless is awakened to the real challenge of human tragedy and the difficulties it proposes for any kind of closure. We have already mentioned this, in regard to tragedy, namely that as an art-form and as a form of representation it resists easy closure or delimitation, and that it continues to propose for us the difficulty and challenge of human suffering. In this regard, Williams' seems to have a consonant attitude and does not seek to resolve the epistemological and existential challenges it poses.

Williams' vision is, admittedly, quite stark, but it is something he learned from reading T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which he interpreted in a strongly incarnationalist fashion. The question for Eliot was:

¹ By saying this, I am not suggesting that 'compassion' should be understood as some kind of utilitarian or instrumentalised process in which the other is treated as merely an expansion of the self, and am I also aware of the complicated history of reflection on the concepts of 'sympathy', particularly on the relation between active, imaginative identification with the other, and the more spontaneous experiences of the *sensus communis*. For a brief reflection on this theme, see Milbank, "The Invocation of Clio: A Response". *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33.1 (2005), 33-36

² On this, see Robert C. Roberts, 'Compassion as an Emotion and Virtue', in *Mitleid*, 119-137.

how can time be redeemed while, at the same time, not abolishing its temporal quality? For Williams, redemption can only have the shape of the incarnated God who 'enters' into the realm of time, with all its vicissitudes and potential meaninglessness. Williams argues (along with Eliot, as he interprets him) that redemption can only be glimpsed incarnationally, that is, by taking time, materiality, and its entanglements as seriously as possible. For Williams, a saviour who was not subject to the same wounds could not provide healing for those wounds (as Gregory Nazianzen already intuited).¹

Regarding woundedness, Williams writes in one of his poems (entitled 'Twelfth Night'), a rather sombre stanza, that 'Behind the stars no happy end, / no dissolution of our scars'. However he nonetheless also believes that redemption remains possible: '...here is / not innocence but absolution, for / your scars are true but I (always) / will bleed in them'.² We are not given 'innocence' nor the absolute certainty that all our woundedness will be made whole, since we are always, as finite beings, entwined with tragic contours of temporality which constitutes as persons, even redeemed persons. And yet, we are promised that the wounds of Christ are precisely the wounds that grant forgiveness and absolution, in which 'Christ makes his own our lament, our penitence, and our fear by adopting the human condition in all its tragic fullness as the material of his Body'.³ So even though Williams remains eschatologically agnostic about whether the problems of history, suffering, and tragedy will be ever solved, he remains hopeful that things can change and that salvation is possible, that we should not surrender to the status quo, or dreadingly accept the some kind of *amor fati*, which simply leaves things the way they are, namely at the mercy of mythologized realities which may continue to go unchallenged (viz. 'the end of history', 'progress', etc.).

1.6. Summary

As we bring this chapter to a close, I should summarise what I have attempted to lay out the thus far. In this chapter, we have attempted to complicate the often assumed incompatibility of the Christian faith with tragic insights. I did this by sketching how modern scholarship has made any simple definition of tragedy problematic, especially when that definition is tied in a strong way with the examples of Greek tragedy. Thereafter, we sought to provide a survey of how tragedy has been appropriated by modern theologians, from the twentieth century onwards. In this context, we briefly sought to lay out Williams' own position within this context, adumbrating briefly his modest and particularly circumscribed understanding of tragic theology, one that is able to move around some of the potential pitfalls of certain renderings of tragic theology. However, full justification and exposition await the remainder of this thesis.

¹ Williams has not changed his fundamental position in this regard. For more on Williams' thoughts on Christology, temporality, and redemption, you can read his reflections on icons and 'the broken image' in Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008), 189-226, as well as his interpretation of the figure of Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* (pp. 47-57).

² Williams, 'Twelfth Night', in *The Poems of Rowan Williams*, 23, 25. It is also worth mentioning here some comments Williams has made in respect to R.S. Thomas, to found in 'Williams, 'Adult Geometry: Dangerous Thoughts in R.S. Thomas'', in M. Wynn Thomas (ed.) *The Page's Drift: R.S. Thomas at Eighty* (Wales: Seren, 1993), 86-89, where Williams (via Thomas) questions the idea of God as solution to all wounds, in which divine Being can be seen as 'a canopy of meaning' which will 'unite and explain things'. Williams does question some of Thomas' more 'dangerous thoughts' in this regard, but it would seem (following what Williams says elsewhere in, for example, 'Trinity and Ontology', 'The Finality of Christ' and 'On Being Creatures') that to project God as the unifier of all meanings, and the solution to every dissonance is itself, most likely, a projection of the ego which desires stability against the flux and uncertainty of historical situatedness.

³ Williams, 'Augustine and the Psalms'. *Interpretation* 58.1 (2004), 20.

In the following chapter, I will seek to expound some of Williams' Augustinian reflections on time and creation, and the beauty thereof. Such a move is a gambit against construing Williams' understanding of materiality, time and history in a particularly negative fashion. By doing so, I am being obedient to his fundamental and classically orthodox position that the goodness and beauty of the world are the primordial realities and co-ordinates, in relation to which we must orientate ourselves. Evil, suffering, and tragedy are not ontological realities, but are privative - a distortion of reality - rather than a manifestation of it

2. *The Beauty of the Contingent*

I will attempt to show here that the theme of the goodness of creation, and the inherent limitations and vulnerability that come with it, are important themes to take note of if we are to understand the assumptions that Williams makes in regard to his understanding of tragedy. To live as creatures means to live within the bounds of time, to have finite resources at one's disposal, and to inhabit a particular place and perspective within the creaturely. This is not a bad thing, but rather is a part of our dignity as creatures, who live and love as temporal beings. Since we are not God, we cannot claim the infinite for ourselves, and so we are bound to the orders of time and materiality in which we inhabit. This is not something we should seek to escape since creation, time and matter continue to mirror the beauty and goodness that is endowed to it. The attempt to escape from the constraints of time is bound up with our primeval attempt to arrogate divinity and power to ourselves, against God and one other. As such, we have to continue to remain humble and conscientious of our limitations. However, as we will get to later in this thesis, to live within time means to inhabit a place where all goods cannot be achieved, where unforeseen consequences, intentional and non-intentional dynamics, result in loss, failure, and even horrendous suffering. And so we have to be able to hold together this bittersweet reality – that life is both good and tragic. This is the reality which we inhabit, as Williams sees it.

As we think of this theme, we should continue to keep in mind the themes of *contingency*, *contemplation*, *compassion*, and the question of *closure*. We shall firstly deal with Williams' reflections on creation, time, and reality of human limitations that are intrinsically a part of our existence as creatures. I shall also deal with Williams' reflections on sin, since – from a Christian perspective – creaturely limitation is bound up with the question sin and moral failure. Furthermore, I shall also deal with Williams' reflections on the body, as well as beauty and art within the context of time-taking.

The reason why I am discussing Williams' thoughts on creation, the body and beauty is because I would like to emphasise the Williams' belief in the fundamental *goodness* of createdness and temporality. Since we are going to spend a large part of this thesis talking about a slightly darker theme, namely the reality of the tragic, it seems prudent to preface our thesis with Williams' affirmation of bodiliness, time, and the created order. To leave such thoughts aside might lead to a one-sided interpretation of his theology.

2.1. *Creation, Temporality, and Sin*

Creation and time for Williams are realities which cannot be separated into consequential facts; they are two sides of the proverbial coin. On this point, like many others within his wider theological project, Williams remains within the classical Augustinian tradition that precedes him. Createdness and temporality are theologically, existentially, and philosophically coeval: to exist as a creature is to live within the bounds of a temporal process, a movement in time within which change and development are assumed. Expounding Augustine, he writes that creation is 'the setting in being of a living system destined to grow toward beauty and order, even if this beauty and order is not at any

given moment fully apparent. Thus...the *temporal* character of the world is axiomatic: it is a world in motion, a set of processes in which potential is realized.¹ He goes on to say 'The story of creation as a whole...is ...a *story*, a process. Its goal is certainly something beyond time, though not exactly an eternal stasis: there is still the movement of love, the steady pressure towards God, the *pondus* drawing and holding things in God-centred harmony.'² From this it can be argued that once creation is there, time and potentiality are there as well: 'Time begins when this realm of potentiality begins to move, to actualize its possibilities.'³ To be created is to exist in time, movement, and flux. For Williams this is a credo essential to the belief that we are creatures existing in the material world. However, according to a classical distinction inherent within the Christian tradition (Augustine, Aquinas, etc.), we need to make a distinction here between creation as an *existing reality*, and creation as an *act*. The category of time applies to the former, but not to the latter. This has some important implications. God's creative act makes time possible – but it cannot be seen as an act that occurs within time.

On this score, Williams is careful to distinguish the divine act of creation from the Neoplatonic doctrine of creation whereby the material world flows out of the One as the result of a natural growth 'outwards'.⁴ Elsewhere Williams also denies that the act of creation *itself* is some kind of process; rather the creative act of God is 'a summons, a call which establishes the very possibility of an answer.'⁵ In other words, it makes time possible, but it is not itself a predicate of time. It is clear from this that Williams is simply expounding the classical doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*⁶; but Williams adds a twist: to believe that God creates out of nothing does not imply an exercise of power over, or an attempt to impose a definition on something which already exists; rather, it is the basis for any kind of relation between God and creature. Following Aquinas, Williams states: 'creation itself is no sort of process; it is not a change...' 'creation' simply points you to existing reality in relation to a creator.'⁷ In other words, the act of creation itself is not locatable within creaturely time, there is no before and after in relation to the creative act of God.⁸ In fact, Williams can even say, following in this tradition, that 'creation is going on *now*' because creation is primarily about God establishing 'an active relationship that never stops...within in every circumstance, every object, every person, God's action

¹ Williams, 'Creation' in Allan Fitzgerald (ed.), *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 252. On the idea that Williams is probably inflecting his interpretation of Augustine with a dose of Hegel, see Jeffrey McCurry, 'Traditioned Creativity: On Rowan Williams and the Grammars of Theological Practice' (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 2006), 263-270.

² *Ibid.*, 253.

³ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁵ Williams, 'On Being Creatures' in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 68.

⁶ We cannot enter into the debate here as to whether *creatio ex nihilo* has explicit or implicit endorsement within the biblical narrative. For an argument that denies the OT teaches creation out of nothing, see Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). For a well-researched account that denies that early Hellenized Judaism and nascent Christianity held onto creation out of nothing, but rather that it was belief drawn out in conflict with Gnosticism, see Gerhard May, *Creatio ex nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation Out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A.S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 1-38. For a critique of May's research that is sensitive to the problems of an explicit affirmation of *creatio ex nihilo* in scripture and early Palestinian Judaism, but nonetheless sees it as an implicit belief, see Markus Bockmuehl 'Creatio ex nihilo in Palestinian Judaism and Early Christianity'. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65 (2012), 253-270.

⁷ 'On Being Creatures', 68.

⁸ One could also make this argument from an Augustinian perspective since for Augustine God is timeless and the material world as a contingent totality is shaped by *forma* and *pondus*. Without *forma* and *pondus* – form and balance - there would be no way to register what change might actually mean, because in total formlessness and contingency, change and process are meaningless. On this, see Williams, 'Good for Nothing? Augustine on Creation'. *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994), 17-18.

is going on, a sort of white heat at the centre of everything...Creation is an action of God that sets up relationship between God and what is not God.¹

As can be seen, Williams' understanding of the *creatio ex nihilo* is traditional in the sense that he holds onto classical doctrines of God's timelessness, and onto the co-occurrence of time and creaturely existence. However, Williams draws some interesting conclusions, in light of contemporary ecological and feminist critiques of divine power. Williams argues rather surprisingly that the classical doctrines of divine aseity, timelessness and *creatio ex nihilo* actually *preserve* creaturely freedom and dignity since 'creation is not an exercise of divine *power*...Power is exercised by *x over y*; but creation is not power, because it is not exercised *on anything*.'² As seems clear, this has implications for our understanding of the nature of God, divine power, creaturely existence as *imago dei*, the extent and full implications of which cannot be entered into here.³

To elaborate a little more: if creating is 'the sort of thing that God does'⁴ because it is 'wholly in accord with the divine being as being-for-another'⁵ and points to 'a creator who works in, not against, our limits, our mortality'⁶, then it means that we are released from the idea that creatureliness, vulnerability, interdependence, and limitation are things which are to be shirked, that history and process are things to be overcome either through technological control, or through ideological assertions of 'the end of history'. If God has entered into our limitations –'the limits of particularity, of bodiliness and mortality...or creatureliness'⁷ - we are consequently released to embrace the dignity of our createdness, and to acknowledge that we are inescapably thrown into a context of finitude and limited perspectives. Because if this is how the divine manifests itself within our time, incarnationally through 'The creative life, death, and resurrection of Jesus'⁸, why should we expect more for ourselves? Our desire to assert ourselves against the world, to establish for ourselves a safe and secure context, a place where we are free to express untrammelled control and management is a fantasy. According to Williams, at the root of our striving to establish our 'divine' status in the world is the belief that ultimately God's purpose for us is opposed to our best interests, what is 'natural' for us is opposed to what God wants for us. But as Williams says 'creation emphatically isn't...any kind of imposition or manipulation: it is not God imposing on us divinely willed roles rather than the ones we might 'naturally' have', or defining us out of our systems into God's. Creation affirms that to be here at all...is 'of God'; it *is* because God wants it so. And this implies that the Promethean myth of humanity

¹ Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 34-36.

² 'On Being Creatures', 68.

³ Williams in this essay is explicitly engaging the thought of Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Sally McFague, particularly as it relates to the theme of divine power and creation. However, what Williams says here in relation to these figures could be applied to the more recent postmodern and eco-feminist treatments of *creatio ex nihilo*, which includes figures such as John Caputo, Catherine Keller, and Mary-Jane Rubenstein. All of these thinkers critique *creatio ex nihilo* as being based on biblically insufficient grounds, and further that it legitimates a form of 'masculine' ontopolitical power, along with all the various theological and spiritual ills that come with such a legitimation. For a sample of such perspectives, see John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006); Catherine Keller, 'Creatio Ex Profundis. Chaostheorie und Schöpfungslehre. *Evangelische Theologie* 69.5 (2009), 356-366; Mary-Jane Rubenstein, 'Cosmic Singularities: On the Nothing and the Sovereign'. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80.2 (2012), 485-517. For some interesting reflections on the idea that for some early texts (both Christian and Jewish), 'nothing' was understood to be multiple, rather than reflecting a singular entity, see Virginia Burrus, 'Nothing is not One: Revisiting the Ex Nihilo'. *Modern Theology* 29.2 (2013), 33-48.

⁴ Williams, 'Creation, Creativity and Creatureliness: the Wisdom of Finite Existence' (2005). Accessed from <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org>, 26/7/2013, n. p.

⁵ 'On Being Creatures', 74

⁶ *Ibid.*, 76

⁷ Williams, 'Trinity and Ontology', in *On Christian Theology*, 158.

⁸ 'On Being Creatures', 76.

struggling against God for its welfare and interests makes no sense: to be a creature cannot be to be a victim of an alien force.’ Instead of saying that God superimposes some alien meaning or sovereign power against nature, Williams says, ‘God’s sovereign purpose *is* what the world is becoming’¹. Even though God creates ‘in God’s interest’ (since there could be no other motive for creation since God is not impelled by any inner or external necessity), that ‘interest’ is not for ‘the building-up of the divine life, which simply is what it is, but its giving away. For God to act for God’s sake *is* for God to act for our sake.’²

This implies that our dignity as creatures is found within the acceptance of *humility* since being creatures is ‘learning humility, not as submission to an alien will, but as the acceptance of limit and death.’³ As Williams says, being a creature is ‘in danger of becoming a lost art’⁴ – we tend to seek total perspectives with the purpose of achieving a ‘godlike’ control and power over our environment. He says that ‘it is not natural to us to be natural.’⁵ We can imagine ourselves as ‘self-regulating’ but this is misguided, because ‘our fundamental need is for identity in relation, conversation, mutual recognition...There is no self-awareness outside the commerce of agents and speakers....My meaning is given by the context I depend on.’⁶ Therefore, we do not need to compete with God, or impose definitions on others: God doesn’t need us, so therefore we do not fulfil any need in God which means that ‘God does not and cannot lay claim upon me so as to ‘become’ God; what I am cannot be made functional for God’s being; I can never be defined by the job of meeting God’s needs’ which means that we live properly as ‘creatures *not* when we attempt to resign from nature by treating ‘God’ as a successful rival for our attention or devotion over against the things and persons of the world, but by our being-in-the-world’. To have being-in-the-world then implies that ‘all attempts *in* the world at providing definitions for other persons and groups’ are ‘attempts to escape the world’ since ‘only one ‘power’ is entirely gift, entirely directed away from its needs (because it has none)’. As a result, all earthly powers are ‘unmasked and demythologized’ since ‘The creator’s power-as-resource cannot be invoked to legitimize earthly power’.⁷

To acknowledge our humility and finitude as also to confess belief in *sin*, which Williams defines as ‘our deeply rooted aversion to our own creatureliness’.⁸ In his doctoral thesis (referring to the work of Lossky), he states that ‘Nature is initially deformed by Adam’s perverted use of his liberty, and now, with tragic appropriateness, this personal liberty becomes enslaved by nature, and the vicious circle of fallenness is completed’.⁹ Elsewhere, he says that human beings are ‘perennially vulnerable to the temptation of arrogating divinity to themselves. It is the temptation manifest in the refusal to accept finitude, creatureliness and dependence’.¹⁰ He goes on to explicate this further by saying that we are ‘born into a world where there is *already* a history of oppression and victimization...before we can be conscious of it, the system of oppressor-victim relations absorbs us. It is this ‘already’ which theology

¹ Ibid., 69.

² Ibid., 74.

³ Ibid., 78.

⁴ Ibid., 77.

⁵ Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (London-New York: Continuum, 1991), 189.

⁶ ‘On Being Creatures’, 71.

⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁸ Ibid., 77.

⁹ Williams, *The Theology of Vladimir Nikolaievich Lossky: An Exposition and Critique* (Ph.D Thesis, Oxford University, 1975), 96.

¹⁰ Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980), 16.

(sometimes rather unhelpfully) refers to as original sin - the sense of primordial 'diminution' from which we all suffer before ever we are capable of understanding or choice.¹ For Williams, the drive to overcome and transcend our finitude is what the church has called *sin* – such a denial of our 'being-towards-death' (to steal a line from Heidegger) is the source of our attempts to assert power and domination over one another. The source of evil and horror is precisely the rejection of our fragility, limitedness, and impotence; that is, our fear of contingency.² Writing more recently in an essay on the theme of temptation, Williams says, that to live within time means that we are subject to things beyond our control: 'to live in the material and temporal world is to be vulnerable to the impact of unstable circumstances' but 'it is how we deal with those circumstances that will bring to light who and what we actually are...what Christ delivers us from is not bodily circumstance, contingency, or instability...but from the habits of mind and heart that that make of this environment only a theatre for our private obsessions to be staged and our lust for control to be exercised.'³

It would be beneficial here to dwell a little longer on the theme of sin, particularly as it relates to the Williams understanding of Augustinian *privatio boni*, also known as the *steresis agathou* or privation theory regarding the origin of sin. Since the theme of tragedy is bound up with the reality of evil and sinful disorder, it seems appropriate to expound this theme a little more. As we have seen already, critics of tragic theology have sought to emphasize that classical Christian theology rejects the movement of ontologizing evil and tragedy. David Bentley Hart writes that 'theology must insist upon "historicizing evil", treating it as the superscribed text of a palimpsest, obscuring the aboriginal goodness of creation.'⁴ John Milbank similarly says 'Christianity refuses, having recognized a universal tragic condition, to ontologize this, but makes the move of seeing the universal itself as but a contingent narrative upshot.'⁵ Both of these statements occur within a context where tragedy in relation to the Christian vision is being discussed, and critiqued theologically. However, if it can be shown that tragic theology does not fall within the purview of this critique, then we have problematized further the rejection of tragic theology as viable Christian response to the reality of evil and suffering. Rowan Williams, in relation to the question of the ontological status of evil, remains a classical Augustinian.

The most in-depth treatment of this theme is to be found in essay written for Gerald Bonner's *Festschrift*⁶. He opens his essay with Augustine's own summation: *Malin enim nulla natura est; sed amissio boni mali nomen accepit*. Evil has not positive nature, but is simply the loss of the good. Williams goes on to comment by saying that 'Talking about evil is not like talking about things, about what makes the constituents of the world the sort of things they are; it is talking about a *process*, about something that happens to the things that there are in the universe. Evil is not some kind of

¹ Ibid. 18.

² There are similarities here to a philosophical account given of evil by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. In his book *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), he states (p.32): 'Fleeing from our own impotence, or trying to adopt it as a weapon, we construct the malevolent power that oppresses those who show their weakness; and failing our innermost possibility of not-being [our contingency], we fall away from the only thing that makes love possible.'

³ Williams, "'Tempted as we are': Christology and the Analysis of the Passions.' *Studia Patristica* 44 (Leuven-Paris-Walpole: Leuven, 2010), 400-401.

⁴ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2003), 384.

⁵ John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London-New York: Routledge, 2003), 149.

⁶ Williams, 'Insubstantial Evil' in George Lawless and Robert Dodaro (eds.), *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner* (London – New York: Routledge, 2000), 105-123.

object...but we give that name of 'evil' to that process in which the good is lost.¹ This constitutes Augustine's understanding of the 'grammar of evil', and we should understand, from this perspective that 'evil is not a subject to which qualities can be ascribed, not a *substantia*.² The effect of sin upon creaturely being is that our ability to see and know God is hindered, and even distorted: 'To see evil as privation is to see it as something that affects my own perception of what is good for me: if evil is the absence of good, it is precisely that misreading of the world that skews my desires.'³

Here it should be said that one of the common criticisms of the privation theory of evil is that a mere privation of the good does not account for the severe, horrifying positivity of evil itself. Williams however argues that the terrifying quality of evil stems not from the fact that it has some ontological positivity, but rather because it perverts the elements in the world which are 'most alive and active'. He goes on to say that evil is 'dreadful and potent because of the kind of world this is, a world in which the active, joyful, goodness of God is mirrored or shared by creatures.' The potency and horror of evil derives from a distorted will, which results in 'a vast misapprehension, a mistaking of the unreal and the groundless for the real'.⁴ Such a misapprehension is particularly severe in the case of human beings (rather than animals for example) because human beings – as social and interdependent creatures – can cause significant harm to one another in their relational interactions. The starkness of evil derives from the fact that something beautiful and excellent has become misdirected and distorted. As such, Augustine's understanding of evil as 'insubstantial' grants moral responsibility to human agents; this is because we should not understand evil as some 'external' force or entity which impinges upon our relations, but should rather find 'the location of evil in the malfunctioning of relations between subjects, not in the relation of this of this or that subject to some other *thing* called 'evil''. Williams uses a musical analogy to explain this by saying that '[a] discord on a musical instrument is not the result of the instrument being interfered with by an external agency *called* discord, it is the function of the workings of what is there, of what constitutes the instrument itself.'⁵ As Williams writes elsewhere, Augustine effectively 'demythologizes' the concept of evil, since for Augustine evil is 'not a *thing* in the universe'⁶ but rather a distortion of reality itself.

The essay continues, but I will expound the rest later in this thesis since Williams thereafter moves onto a discussion of the tragic from an Augustinian perspective. Since such a discussion fits more with the genealogical study I will engage with later, I have left such an engagement until then. However, for our purposes here, we have shown that Williams cannot be accused of 'ontologizing' evil or equating it with some ahistorical or aprioristic datum. As we have seen, he understands evil to be the result of a historical process, which does not exist as a 'positive' entity part from its privative action

¹ Ibid., 105.

² Ibid., 107.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 110-111.

⁵ Ibid., 112. For a further trenchant espousal of the *privatio boni*, see Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 1-25. For more a phenomenological approach to the *privatio boni* in which evil is understood to be mere 'appearance', without 'substance' or 'essence', see Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Malum: Theologische Hermeneutik des Bösen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 77-98. Dalferth also gives an excellent historical and philosophical treatment of the origins of the concept, beginning with its Platonic and Neo-Platonic contexts until Augustine (ibid., 123-159). He acknowledges the limitations of this tradition, in the sense that both are concerned with the question of *Unde Malum?* (the *Woher-Frage*), the question of πῶθεν τὰ κακά rather than with the question of why there is evil or privation in the first place (the *Warum-Frage*). You can also read a very good summary of Augustine's understanding of the 'nothingness' of evil in Friedrich Hermann, 'Augustinus über Gott, das Gutsein des Seienden und die Nichtigkeit der Bösen' in Aurelius Augustinus, *Opera – Werke: De Natura Boni / Contra Secundum Manichaeum*, Johannes Brachtendorf and Volker Henning Drecoll (eds.), Band 22 (Paderborn: Friedrich Schöningh, 2010), 47-68.

⁶ Williams, 'Review: *Augustine on Evil* by G. R. Evans. *Religious Studies*. 21.1 (1985), 96.

upon creaturely will and action. Since evil is 'insubstantial', it does not exist apart from its parasitic actuality in relation to the good. Therefore, if we are to consider Williams a coherent thinker and theologian, we should say that his understanding of tragedy does not contradict his understanding of evil. We will expand on this further as this thesis develops.

To summarize thus far, I have sought to show in Williams' theology the connection between creation and time. I argued that while the act of creation itself should not be understood as a process itself, once creation is here, time and movement are an inevitable reality that flows from it. Thereafter, I sought to show that for Williams true creatureliness involves the acceptance of our limited nature, our dependence, and vulnerability. Attempts to transcend our status as creatures are not necessary because our dignity is found precisely within this matrix. We do not have to assert our rights with God, or try to compete with God since God is not opposed to what is best or 'natural' for us. The attempt to transcend our finitude and limited perspectives is precisely the source of the primordial violence and manipulative power we use to assert ourselves against the world. It results in a denial of our bodily existence as creatures. I also dealt with Williams' Augustinian understanding of evil, and how it liberates him from certain criticisms which might be lodged against a viable tragic theology.

2.2. Body, Materiality and Time

*'If the body is always deep but deepest at its surface...'*¹

In relation to the theme of the body, Williams has spoken about the 'the inescapable significance of *time* as a correlate of bodiliness' which is part of 'a return to 'surfaces' or appearances' which is 'conscious of the irreducible elements of history and contingency in the formation of knowledge and religious faith'.² For Williams, attention to materiality and bodiliness are essential for theological thinking because thinking about such issues opens us to the reality of limit and finite perspectives, and it forces us to be aware of the fact that our theologizing and reflective enterprises are part of a shared network of interdependence and conversation which is irreducible. He says that 'theology must rediscover itself as a language that assists us in *being mortal*, living in the constraints of a finite and material world without resentment'.³ Williams' understanding of bodiliness includes a theory of language that refers to limit and vulnerability, and to the reality of a shared discourse from which we cannot extract ourselves. As a person, I am 'born into a continuum of language and interaction I did not choose or invent'.⁴ The appeal to 'surfaces' and 'appearances' mentioned above is reference to Williams' belief that we will think more profoundly if we attend to the *materiality* of our engagement and discourse with the world. That is, rather than seeking to find the truth about ourselves in some realm that is beyond language, or in some interiority that is discrete from the world of discourse, it is only in continued discourse that we can learn. Here Williams is opposing such a method to one in which we seek to find truth in some kind of private interiority, as if what is 'interior' were not itself the

¹ Anne Carson, *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 97.

² Williams, 'Author's Introduction' in Mike Higton (ed.), *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), xvi.

³ Williams, 'The Suspicion of Suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer' [1988], in *Wrestling with Angels*, 186.

⁴ Williams, 'Politics and the Soul: A Reading of *The City of God*. *Milltown Studies* 19-20 (1987), 55.

product of interaction with the world and shared discourse. The implications of this for theological reasoning are that we cannot seek to escape the contingent and cultural process of meaning-making that is inherent in all our interactions with the world: we are shoved against limits and the sheer materiality of things ('what is awkwardly and meaninglessly *there*'¹) which will not be confined or reduced to any 'systematic' description or unifying discourse since 'The search for the single story of humanity reflects...the flight from the risks of discourse'.² So as a result, theological reflection should 'equip us for knowing and being known *humanly*, taking time with the human world and not aiming to have done with knowing (and desiring)'.³

In reference to the physical human body, Williams writes that 'the body is never helpfully described as an object like other material objects. By that curious material transaction called language, we continue to recognize that the oddity of this material reality that is *my* body is an oddity shared by other materially recognizable bodies.'⁴ For Williams, following the Thomistic tradition, 'the body *is* the soul - that is, the body does not become intelligent, purposeful, endowed with feeling and so on because something is added to it. This is what the body is - a *meaning* portion of matter'.⁵ We can see that Williams understands the physical body as 'site' of interaction with the world, that it is 'necessarily intelligent'⁶, though not in a reductive sense whereby 'intelligence' is understood as simply computable information. Rather, we should understand the body in space and time as that which interacts with the world in a myriad of complex relationships, relationships that are 'not easily reducible to function because it seems to work with 'information' of a less determinate character, less capable of being rendered in items of information.'⁷ The body we inhabit is the place where make ourselves available to and addressable by others. As such, the body is capable of language and communication with the world, the complexity of which opens us to the inherent limitations and finitude we inhabit because 'what we are *are* our limits, that we are here not there, now not then, took this decision, not that, to bring us here and now.'⁸

And it is precisely here – in our vulnerability and limits - that we opened to 'the being-at-hand of love'⁹ in relation to God and to others, because we realize that 'the self God deals with is not some mysterious inner core, but my body' and that bodies are 'where we learn and where we speak and share. If we cannot love our mortal vulnerability, our own frail flesh, we shall love nothing and nobody'.¹⁰ According to Williams, the only way we can interact lovingly with our environment and God

¹ Ibid., 195.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 199

⁴ Williams, 'On Being a Human Body'. *Sewanee Theological Review* 42.4 (1998), 406.

⁵ Ibid. p. 406. Cf. also Williams, 'Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion', in Lionel R. Wickham and Catherine P. Bammel (eds.), *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity: Essays in Tribute to Christopher Stead* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1993), 227-246 for a discussion on the relation between reason, animality, the body as well as the passions. On a related point, but not relevant to this argument, it is worth taking note of the politics surrounding the idea of brain death as equaling the death of the body. For the idea that equalization of brain death with the death of the body is a political gesture, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 160-164. For a critique of the idea from a medical and philosophical perspective, see Robert Spaemann, *Love and the Dignity of Human Life: On Nature and Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 45ff.

⁶ Ibid., 405. It might be useful here to compare Williams' reflections here (inspired largely by Merleau-Ponty) with Jean-Luc Nancy's theory of the body. For Nancy, the body itself does not communicate anything except itself. Ultimately, for Nancy, there is no body, only 'corpuses'. For more on this, see Nancy, 'Corpus' in *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes et al (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 189-207.

⁷ Ibid., 405

⁸ 'The Suspicion of Suspicion', 186.

⁹ 'On Being a Human Body', 408.

¹⁰ Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, 35.

is through attention to our bodiliness, with all its hindrances and fragilities since this is the matrix where we learn what it means to be 'spiritual'¹, what it means to love and to have communion with God and one another: 'before God, we can only celebrate the fact that we are, and are free to be *human* with God for God and because of God; and wait without clear prediction or absolute conceptual security for the further perception of and delight in God's being God.'² Elsewhere, he says that 'we encounter God truly *only* when we accept our mortal fragility for what it is, do not seek to escape it, but put our trust in a God who speaks and relates to us through flesh.'³ In other words, we should not look to some inner part of ourselves (soul, intellect, will) that is more 'godlike' and therefore more capable of communion with God since these are 'as much creaturely as the body and the passions, and so as much in need of transformation'⁴, and this means that we cannot long for a spirituality that seeks to escape the body, language, or from the continuing discourse that occurs within human conversation since to do so would be to return to a kind of Gnostic escape from the world of the temporal and the fleshly. For Williams, 'fleshly life is not a burden to be borne, nor a prison to be escaped from, but a task to be perfected in grace.'⁵ It is precisely within the life of the body that we learn and are transformed through the divine working of holiness within the fragilities of time, where we come to 'the recognition of the holy within the contingent order' even though it is 'always undercut by the disruptive, discontinuous elements in a narrative which is inescapably one of exile and alienation, loss and death.'⁶ The emphasis on bodiliness and time is based on the goodness of creation, but it has a further basis in the divine incarnation: 'The embrace of our creatureliness, and resistance to all that draws us away from the recognition from the centrality of *time* – these are consequences of the act of the incarnation.'⁷ He goes on to say that 'By the incarnation, God binds us to the temporal world as always and inescapably our starting point and dispossesses us of the illusion that there is a point within the temporal world where we can settle. Every point in the temporal order becomes a point of departure.'⁸

To summarize, I have shown that for Williams that materiality and bodiliness are realities that have to be acknowledged and accepted if we are to live as creatures before God, confessing and accepting our limitations as concomitant with our existence in time. An acceptance of this reality means that we have to learn to understand ourselves as vulnerable to time and flux, and that we live in a world of interdependence and discourse from which we cannot extricate ourselves – even if we wanted to. But I have also shown that Williams believes that acceptance of our bodiliness is essential to

¹ For the relation between spirituality and createdness in Williams' thought, see Byron Smith, 'The Humanity of Godliness: Spirituality and Creatureliness in Rowan Williams' in Matheson Russell (ed.), *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays*, 115-140. For some helpful reflections that seek to align spiritual practices to engagement in the world of discourse, tradition, and theology, and seeks to distance spirituality from some kind of withdrawal into 'the self' (which is a construct of language anyway), see Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 3-38.

² 'On Being Creatures', 75.

³ 'Good for Nothing? Augustine on Creation', 18. Williams is referencing Augustine here, but as we have seen he endorses this point.

⁴ Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross*, (rev. ed., London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21. Williams is referencing Ignatius of Antioch here, but he endorses this point, as the context bears out.

⁶ Williams, 'Troubled Breasts: The Holy Body in Hagiography', in Jan Willem Drijvers and John W. Watt (eds.) *Portraits of Spiritual Authority: Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium, and the Christian Orient* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 77.

⁷ Williams, 'Augustine's Christology: Its Spirituality and Rhetoric', in Peter W. Martens (ed.), *In the Shadow of the Incarnation: Essays on Jesus Christ in the Early Church in Honour of Brian E. Daley, S.J.* (Indiana, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 177.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 179. The last phrase is taken from Michel De Certeau.

understanding our relationship with God, the world, and one another. As such, it is essential to our spirituality and understanding our materiality as fundamentally good.

2.3 Art, Beauty and Time-Taking

In this brief concluding section to this chapter, we will discuss Williams' reflections on beauty, art, and its relation to temporality. Such reflections are there to further confirm Williams' axiomatic belief in the goodness and beauty of created life. For Williams, the artist is someone who seeks 'to *add* to the world, to co-operate in the making of the world'¹. However, this making of the world is not an imposition of meaning, but rather the discovery of beauty that is already there, hidden within the density of reality, unfolded through the labour of attention, discipline and patient artistry.

In a short article published for an art exhibition at St. Matthew's Church in Northampton², Williams explicitly brought the theme of art into conversation with the theme of 'time-taking' and 'making sense'.³ He says that 'art is an image of how human beings can use *time* and the things that live in time (bodies, sounds, stories, and textures) to make sense – that is, to make a world that can be shared by other beings with mind and feeling.' He goes on to say good art is not the result of the artist imposing his or her will upon their material, but is rather a process of 'discovery' and 'releasing' what is in some sense already 'there' since 'artistic labour is way of profoundly living *in* the world, built on the knowledge that human beings can exercise their proper human intelligence only *in*, not over or against, a world that is beyond their plans and preferences.' And as such, good art demands our time and patience to acknowledge 'the time and patience built into the work.' As such, a work of art in its beauty and 'excess' invites joy and admiration, but it also invites 'pain and judgement' since it recalls us to 'our fragility and the limits of our power over who we are and what we are'. Taking time can be a painful process that opens us to vulnerability because it reminds us that 'we live in our skins'. It reminds us that we live in our bodies and in time. For Williams, the production of art requires time-taking, allowing the work of art to 'unfold' itself through the process of patience and even self-renunciation or *metanoia*.⁴ It is through this process that 'the world' can become a true object within the contemplative practice of artistic labour. From this we can not only see that Williams ascribes

¹ Williams, 'Eric Gill'. *Sobornost: The Journal of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius* 7.4 (1977), 265.

² Williams, 'Art: Taking Time and Making Sense', in T. Devonshire-Jones (ed.), *Images of Christ. Religious Iconography in Twentieth Century British Art. An Exhibition to mark the Centenary of St Matthew's Church, Northampton* (St Matthew's (Northampton) Centenary Art Committee, 1993), 25-27. I would like to thank Ben Myers for alerting me to this article. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from this text.

³ For more on the temporal quality of William's hermeneutic of patience and 'making sense', see Medi Volpe, "'Taking Time' and 'Making Sense': Rowan Williams on the Habits of Theological Imagination", *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15.3 (2013), 345-360.

⁴ It could be mentioned here in passing that Paul Evdokimov once suggested that the 'reverse perspective' of icon-writing was itself a form of artistic *metanoia*. Williams mentions this in his first published review entitled 'Review of Paul Evdokimov, *La Connaissance de Dieu selon la Tradition Orientale*, Lyon: Xavier Mappus, 1967. *Sobornost: The Journal of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius* 6.5 (1972), 360. He goes on elsewhere to say that art demands from 'the artist himself [sic]...a radical *metanoia*, the burying of his individuality in the canons of the tradition, the acceptance of anonymity'. For this quotation, see Williams, 'Christian Art and Cultural Pluralism: Reflections on "L'art de l'icone", by Paul Evdokimov'. *Eastern Churches Review* 8.1 (1976), 39-40. For more reflections on the social responsibilities of the artist, and their contribution to communal meaning-making, see Williams, 'Eric Gill', 261-269.

beauty to the created order but further, that it is *time* itself that opens the portal to seeing beauty within the material world.¹

For Williams, the artist is concerned about uncovering what is, in some sense, already *there* within the world, the objectivity of the world that cannot be reduced to the ego of the artist. There is an ‘excessiveness’ to the world² that cannot be reduced to mere functionality³, and that it is such superfluity that opens the way for artistic labour. But nonetheless, what is posited and put forward is something *new*, and cannot be deemed as simple repetition. For Williams, ‘the poetic embrace of the concrete’ is a movement and praxis which cannot be equated with a ‘repetition or reproduction of what is given’ but rather ‘evokes or realizes the given in a new way, it posits a new world which is the depths of the old.’⁴ As he has said elsewhere: ‘The artist...is involved at a very deep level in trying to do justice to [the] divine principle of non-repetition.’⁵ But this process of creation is something that can only unfold within the process of time.⁶

Williams’ most sustained treatment of the theme of art is to be found in his Clark Lectures, delivered in 2005, published as *Grace and Necessity*.⁷ He writes that art engages us in ‘an unforeseen pattern of coherence and integrity’ and further that ‘art uncovers relations and resonances in the field of perception that ‘ordinary’ seeing and experiencing obscure or even deny...Thus art in

¹ In relation to various forms of art, Williams has also suggested that music is the preeminent art form in which time-taking is necessary. He uses music as a theological analogy when he says, ‘There’s no way of thinking about or responding intelligently to music that isn’t about taking time; the meaning is in the taking of time. That speaks to me very forcefully because certainly one dimension of theology is about the time, the history of relationship with God. There are things that cannot be said without the taking of time.’ (Breyfogle, ‘Time and Transformation’, 229) In sermon on ‘Keeping Time’ (*A Ray of Darkness*, 216-217), he says ‘“The authority of music, what silences and holds us, is...one of the fullest parables we have of the authority of God, not in commanding and imposing from outside, but in asking for our time, so that it can become a time of mending and building. In that double gift — time given away, time given back — we are taken more deeply into the wisdom of God, and freed from the destructive illusion that we are supposed to be God. There is no wisdom for us if we cannot receive it as gift...”’ Examples and analogies in this regard could be multiplied: theatre, sculpting, parables and film (Andrey Tarkovsky come to mind here) could also be mentioned. Cf. Myers (*Christ the Stranger*, 71), where he uses a scene of Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* to illustrate the significance of the incarnation in Williams’ thought: ‘...the camera slowly pans across the endless trail of debris, observing each thing with a disquieting, indiscriminating attentiveness. It is a scene like this that we can, for once, glimpse the meaning of the incarnation.’ Tarkovsky, in a watershed moment for cinematic art, sought to show how the actuality of time was central to the art of film-making. On this, see Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1987). It should be mentioned in passing that one of Williams’ favourite films is Tarkovsky’s *Andrei Rublev*, a film about the medieval Russian iconographer (cf. James MacIntyre’s *New Statesman* interview with Rowan Williams: <http://www.newstatesman.com/religion/2008/12/williams-archbishop-lambeth>). That this film has had an influence on Rowan Williams’ understanding of ‘the icon’ is difficult to deny after you have read his reflections ‘the broken image’ in Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008), 189-226.

² Williams is also influenced here by Balthasar, particularly in his concept of analogy, in the sense that Balthasar sought to understand the excessiveness and ‘unfinishedness’ of the world as something that finds correspondence with the beauty of God. For more on this, Williams, ‘Balthasar and Difference’, in *Wrestling with Angels*, 77-85. For a more sustained recent treatment of this theme, see David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 241-249, and John R. Betz, ‘The Beauty of the Metaphysical Imagination’, in Peter M. Candler Jr. and Conor Cunningham (eds.), *Belief and Metaphysics* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 41-65.

³ For Williams, art in an exemplary manner (like religion in its best manifestations) resists the managerial and functionalist practices of what he calls ‘programmatically secularism’ which is unable to deal with potentially unforeseen perspectives, and with a sense of the tragic – the belief that human society can be endlessly technologized without coming up against limitation, or that which cannot be reduced to ‘functionalist’ procedures. For more on this, see Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London, Bloomsbury: 2012), 11-22. In a review of Alister McGrath’s book on C.S. Lewis, he makes similar statements regarding ‘late modernity’ in which we have ‘[a] tyranny of reducing issues to technological problem-solving, [a] deep schism between the human and nature, [a] lethal impatience with the limits of the body’, in Williams, ‘An Intellectual Presence? Alister McGrath on C. S. Lewis’. *Theology* 116.6 (2013), 408.

⁴ Williams, ‘Suspending the Ethical: R.S. Thomas and Kierkegaard’, in Damien Walford Davies (ed.), *Echoes to the Amen: Essays after R.S. Thomas* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2003), 218.

⁵ Williams, ‘Making It Strange: Theology in Other(’s) Words’, in Jeremy Begbie (ed.), *Sounding the Depths: Theology through the Arts* (London: SCM, 2002), 30

⁶ It might also be important here to emphasise the importance of ‘memory’ and recognition for the whole aesthetic operation, whether it be in artistic creation, or in noticing beauty. For more on this, see Graham Ward, ‘The Beauty of God’, in John Milbank, Graham Ward and Edith Wyschogrod, *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 35-65.

⁷ *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London-New York: 2005).

one sense 'dispossesses' us of our habitual perception and restores to reality a dimension that necessarily escapes our conceptuality and control. It makes the world strange.'¹ Quoting the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, he says that 'things are more than they are' and that they 'give more than they have'.² In the same lectures, he also described the artistic process as 'a spiral of self-extending symbolic activity' that is 'inescapably mobile, time-related'. This is because 'truthfulness unfolds...and makes possible different levels of appropriating or sharing in the activity that is the world'³ since 'the life of reality is what unfolds in time, generating more and more symbolic structures, not a timeless and relation-free definition.'⁴

So what we have seen in thus far is that for Williams, the excessiveness and beauty of the created world is something that can only be perceived in the taking of time. Such a practice of time-taking implies seems to acknowledge that temporality is central to the discovery of beauty within the material order, and therefore is part of the aesthetic and creative process of artistic labour. And therefore we can affirm again that for Williams the existence of materiality within temporal process is bound up with the ontological goodness of creation.

To bring this chapter to a conclusion: herein, I sought to explicate theme of creation, time, and bodiliness. In terms of our wider theme, I sought to show that living within time and materiality is something good and created by God. To be a creature means to be subject to the flux of time and material forces, and this is something that cannot be shirked, without significant problems arising. But if being a creature means being subject to the vicissitudes of history and finitude, this implies that being a creature means being open to the reality of the tragic. Since there are many dynamics and movements within time that are the product of creaturely action, which are not always subject to control and technological manipulation, tragedy remains a continual possibility. Creation and time are a result of divine action, but the shadow side of finitude and creaturely limitation are bound up with its goodness. I sought also to show that for Williams the body and language are essential for our existence as creatures, because it is only through accepting our bodies, and the limitations they involve, that we can be open to love. And lastly, we also briefly dealt with some of Williams reflections on art and time-taking to show once again that Williams holds the created order to something that displays superfluous beauty, and that the temporal process of time and patience are essential features for discovering this beauty.

¹ Ibid., 37. One can also compare some similar comments made by Williams regarding 'sign-making' and a rejection of 'crude representationalism' in 'Christian Art and Cultural Pluralism', 40. For some similar reflections on poetry, you can read the preface to John Milbank, *The Mercurial Wood: Sites, Tales, Qualities* (Salzburg-Oxford-Portland: University of Salzburg, 1997), xii-xiv. In reference to song, poetry and fiction, he speaks of 'the apostrophic invocation of the unknown which lurks always behind the site itself' (p. xiii).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. 137.

⁴ Ibid. 139-140.

3. *The Four Quartet Lectures: The Development of a Historical and Visionary Consciousness*

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will engage in a detailed reading of Williams' unpublished *Four Quartet* lectures.¹ As far as I know, this will be the first sustained treatment of these texts, even though they have been dealt with elsewhere briefly. Through this analysis, I aim to show that Williams is engaging in a theological reading of these texts which seeks to expound the theme of enduring the meaninglessness and tragedy of time, and that it is only through such patient endurance that a Christian understanding of hope can be purged from 'the world of speculation' (as Eliot terms it). For Williams, as he reads Eliot, we come to a vision of redemption only within time, because it is only within history and time that sense can be made of the apparent irredeemability of history and temporality. The underlying motif of the incarnation, only hinted at in the *Quartets* themselves, is a theme which provides the matrix for an interpretation of the Eliot's tragic vision of history. By analysing these texts in more detail, I aim to show that Williams' understanding of tragedy cannot be reduced to simplistic acceptance of pain *tout court*, or that it is eschatologically pessimistic. Furthermore, I seek to further my contention that his tragic vision does not rest on an ontology of violence, vis-à-vis the critique of John Milbank and David Bentley Hart. Rather, for Williams, tragedy is a predicate of dwelling *within* creaturely time. Since we are creatures, bounded by time and materiality, we cannot seek to usurp or transgress our temporality. As we have shown previously in our chapter on creation, body, and time, the attempt to break out of time and our finitude is concomitant with our own sinful will-to-power (*libido dominandi*) in which we seek to overcome our own limitedness. But since we are inherently and inextricably bound within time, this means we are subject to the vicissitudes of time, and the potential for tragedy which comes with it.

I also aim in this chapter is to further deepen my contention that Williams' construal of tragedy is entwined with the themes of *contingency*, *contemplation*, *compassion*, and the problem of *closure*. Williams' and Eliot's attentiveness to the *contingency* – and the concomitant tragedy it involves – stems from a practice of contemplative reflection in which the reality and indubitability of the world is taken seriously. *Contemplative* (or attentive) practice is viewed as an antidote to the machinations of ego in which the external world is reduced to the fantastical projections of the self. Furthermore, attentiveness to the sheer thereness of tragedy in the world – in all its rebarbative effects towards the ego – opens one to the experience of *compassion*, whereby one is taken outside of oneself towards the other. Such a practice of compassion is grounded in the divine movement of compassion to be found in the incarnating-act of God (though it should be admitted that the theme of compassion does not come up a lot in these lectures). And in turn, this practice of patience, attentiveness, and compassion puts before us the reality of *non-closure* in relation to our dealings with the world, and that we cannot seek to escape the existential and theological *difficulty* that tragedy proposes.

¹ I owe a debt to Ben Myers for giving me access to these texts.

Before we begin in our detailed reading, we have to give a little more background before we engage. More than any other poet, it was Eliot who influenced and absorbed Williams' concentration during his early twenties and thirties.¹ In 1974, he was invited to deliver lectures on the *Four Quartets* at the General Theological Seminary situated in Manhattan, New York. He also delivered the same lectures to the sisters at Fairacres in 1975.² It was an important time for Williams since it was during this period that he was completing his doctoral dissertation under Donald Allchin at Oxford.³ Further, it was also during this period (1974) that he published one of his earliest journal articles on the theme of 'The Spirit of the Age to Come'. This essay bears further examination since it touches on relevant themes to our discussion. However, before we come to that, it seems prudent to give some background in relation to Williams' interest in the theme of tragedy. And here the figure of Donald MacKinnon looms large.

3.2. Donald MacKinnon⁴

Already from his time at Cambridge before he moved onto Oxford⁵, Williams was influenced very early on by theological vision of Donald MacKinnon, his teacher there. It was MacKinnon and Shakespeare (particularly *King Lear*)⁶ that awakened the young Williams to stark and intractable difficulty of tragedy. MacKinnon thought that Christian theology, historically speaking, had laid much more emphasis on metaphysical problems inherited from Greek philosophy, while forgetting another significant contribution of the Greeks, namely the art form of tragedy: 'There is a sense in which Christian theology may be much more than it realizes the victim of the victory won in the person of Plato by the philosophers over the poets, and in particular the tragedians.'⁷ MacKinnon did not promote – as can be seen clearly from this quotation – a kind of de-Hellenization of Christianity; rather, MacKinnon sought to investigate how tragedy as an art-form might provide insights, and even revelation, into human nature and theology. Why should the believer assume that there were 'no revelations concerning the human situation to be found in Sophocles and Shakespeare'?⁸ It should be said here that this is in harmony with MacKinnon's broader argument that the philosopher of religion occupies 'borderlands' in which he or she may 'feel a peculiar kinship with those who, from similarly situated territory, make protesting raids upon the theologians cherished homeland.'⁹ It seems then

¹ David Cunningham, 'Living the Questions: The Converging Worlds of Rowan Williams. *Christian Century* 119.2 (2002), 29.

² It is this later version which I will reference in what is to follow. The lectures are dated 18 February – 11 March 1975. For more information on this, see Rupert Shortt, *Rowan's Rule: The Biography of the Archbishop* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008), 89-91.

³ The thesis was finished and passed in early 1975. The thesis was entitled 'The Theology of Vladimir Nikoleivich Lossky: An Exposition and Critique'. Lossky was very influential on Williams' appropriation of negative theology, a fact which one should not ignore as we come to his interpretation of the *Four Quartets*. In his interview with Todd Breyfogle ('Time and Transformation: A Conversation with Rowan Williams', *Cross Currents* (1995), 308), Williams has stated that it was '[Vladimir] Lossky who rubbed my nose in the whole idea of the theology of negation and what it did and didn't mean.' It is also a well-known fact among interpreters of the *Quartets* that negative theology had an influence on Eliot's composition. Figures like St. John of the Cross lie in the background.

⁴ I have been helped significantly in this section by Giles Waller, 'Freedom, Fate and Sin in Donald MacKinnon's Use of Tragedy' in *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory* (Great Britain: Ashgate, 2011), 101-117.

⁵ For more on this period, see Shortt, *Rowan's Rule*, 61-63

⁶ Breyfogle, 'Time and Transformation', 295.

⁷ MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968), 100.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 54. MacKinnon seems to have influenced Williams in a significant way on this point. Williams does not make this hermeneutical influence explicitly obvious in any writings that I am aware of, but one only has to compare MacKinnon's essay

that MacKinnon's interest in Greek tragedy stems – partly at least - from a hermeneutical concern to create a dialogue between the literary-tragic vision of the poets, and Christian theology. This is not the only reason, or even the main reason for MacKinnon's insistence for a tragic theology, but it does provide a particular perspective on MacKinnon's desire to promote tragedy as one 'system of projection'¹ (amongst others) which acts as 'a means of representing the relations of the familiar to the transcendent...a form of representation that by the very ruthlessness of its interrogation enables us to project as does no available alternative, our ultimate questioning.'²

It would be difficult to understand MacKinnon's thought here if one did not situate him within the contexts of the philosophical debate between idealism and realism. MacKinnon published quite extensively on this topic, and it pervades the tenor of his entire theology.³ And it is within this debate that MacKinnon's reflections on tragedy gain particular force. In terms of his own situation within the debate, MacKinnon comes down on the side of realism; and the main reason for him doing so is tied to his reflections on tragedy. It could be said that MacKinnon advocated a kind of 'tragic realism' in which the particularity of human suffering was taken seriously, and provided a way of dealing with the impasse between these two philosophical poles.⁴ For MacKinnon (as Ben Myers puts it), tragedy is 'morally and metaphysically irreducible'⁵ and thereby cannot be equated with a more idealistic approach in which the structures of the world are just a result of construction. For MacKinnon, tragedy opens a way out of the vicious circle of the realism-idealism debate. In his well-known Gifford Lectures⁶, MacKinnon sought to make use of the concept of tragedy as a way to overcome the traditional Kantian strictures on the limits of metaphysical knowledge since for MacKinnon, the reality of tragedy forces us to a decision: we either have to say that tragedy is a construction of the mind, and therefore trivial or revisable, or we have to acknowledge the particularly dignity of tragedy, thereby acknowledging its transcendent dimension, that is, something that cannot be constructed or reduced to the strictures of apperception. He writes that 'we are constrained in pondering the extremities of human life to acknowledge the transcendent as the only alternative to the kind of trivialisation which would empty of significance the sorts of experience with which we have been concerned'⁷, namely suffering and the experience of tragedy. Such an experience acts as 'a kind of ontological intrusion that makes such experience not simply a matter of wilful fantasy or even imaginative indulgence, but rather a response to what is there.'⁸ MacKinnon's emphasis here on the

'Borderlands of Theology' and Williams article 'The Judgement of the World' (now collected in *On Christian Theology*) to see the obvious points of convergence.

¹ For more on this, see MacKinnon, 'The Problem of the System of Projection' Appropriate to Christian Theological Statements' [1969], in *Explorations in Theology 5* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 70-89.

² MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 136.

³ For a sample of some of his treatments of this theme, see MacKinnon, 'Idealism and Realism: An Old Controversy Renewed' [1976] and 'The Conflict between Realism and Idealism: Remarks on the Significance for the Philosophy of Religion of a Classical Philosophical Controversy recently renewed [1977] in *Explorations in Theology 5*, 138-150, 151-165. For more on the debate between realism and idealism in relation to MacKinnon's theology, see Fergus Kerr, 'Idealism and Realism: An Old Controversy Dissolved', in Kenneth Surin (ed.), *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), 15-33; Nicholas Lash, 'Dissolved, Renewed, Remembered: MacKinnon and Metaphysics'. *New Blackfriars* 82.969 (2001), 486-498. For a more recent in-depth treatment of MacKinnon's thoughts on realism and idealism, see Paul D. Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire: Reference, Reason and Christian Thinking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 80-101.

⁴ On this theme, see Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London – New York: T & T Clark, 2012), 21-27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 22

⁶ Published as *The Problem of Metaphysics*

⁷ *Ibid.* 145.

⁸ *Ibid.* 154.

tragic within human experience acts as counter-acting force towards any reductive naturalism in which human nature and the world were understood simply as biological and physical processes since such a procedure of investigation was unable to deal with the moral problem of suffering.

In this light, MacKinnon was critical of any attempt (in even within scripture) of presenting 'the catastrophic course of events as expressive of the working of a traceable providential order' and rejected 'the emergence of an apologetic style which seeks to make the intolerable bearable, even edifying, which seeks also to eliminate the unfathomable mystery by an attempt to move beyond tragedy.'¹ Instead, MacKinnon suggested that Christianity might provide us with the faith 'to hold steadfastly to the significance of the tragic' whereby we can guard ourselves against 'that sort of synthesis which seeks to obliterate by the vision of an all-embracing order the sharper discontinuity of human existence'². Such a vision would refuse to be involved in 'shrinking the tragic'³ to something less than it is. MacKinnon goes as far as to say that tragedy is ineradicable (even eschatologically) and that the problem of evil ultimately has no solution; he considers all theodicies to be an inadequate attempt to solve the problem of evil. As MacKinnon strongly puts it: 'It is sometimes said by fools that Christianity offers a solution to the problem of evil. That is quite simply a lie, nor more, no less than sheer falsehood'.⁴

The focus on suffering and the problem of evil, leads MacKinnon to an emphasis on the cross and the materiality of the history of Jesus, and its involvement in time. MacKinnon seeks to apply his understanding of tragedy to his Christology and his understanding of the Trinity: to be involved in time, as God does through Christ, implies that one is subject to 'the sort of fragmentation of effort, the curtailment of design, the interruption of purpose, distraction of resolve that belongs to temporal experience.'⁵ It involves what MacKinnon has called an *analogy of limits*, specifically as it is applied to the incarnation of God in Christ, in a similar manner to the way we use the *analogy of personality* in relation to Christological and Trinitarian dogma.⁶ The limitation and materiality of incarnation implies that God works within the movements and vicissitudes of time; and this means that it is entwined with the tragic entailments that time involves. The dereliction of the cross, and its effective history⁷, disillusion us from the possibility that we shall find in this event 'a metaphysically assailable solution of the problems set by the world's existence, and allow ourselves to be measured by its rough, untidy, always concrete actuality' whereby we are 'alerted to refuse the solution of a humanly tidy dismissal

¹ Ibid., 129.

² Ibid., 135.

³ MacKinnon, 'A Master in Israel: Hans Urs Von Balthasar', in Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Engagement with God* (London: SPCK, 1975), 8. MacKinnon is using this phrase in reference to the theology of Balthasar

⁴ *Borderlands of Theology*, 155. For an examination, and sympathetic critique of MacKinnon on this point, see Brian Hebblethwaite, 'MacKinnon and the Problem of Evil', in *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy*, 131-145. It should be said here that MacKinnon also rejects the *privatio boni* or *steresis* as a solution to the origin of evil. For MacKinnon, understanding evil as privation of the good cannot deal with the radical nature of evil; on this point, Williams would disagree with his teacher. For a pretty orthodox defense of the *privatio boni* that attempts to take into account this critique, see Williams, 'Insubstantial Evil', 105-123.

⁵ MacKinnon, 'The Relation of the Doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity' in Richard McKinney (ed.), *Creation, Christ and Culture: Studies in Honour of T. F. Torrance* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976), 104.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ MacKinnon has emphasized in several places throughout his writings that we cannot understand the cross apart from its effective history, and this means that the history of anti-Semitism in the Christian West – culminating in the Shoah – should be seen (from a tragic perspective) as part of its story. Cf. his comment (*The Problem of Metaphysics*, 130), where he says that '[t]he events of the present century and in particular what happened in Germany between 1933 and 1945 rob any serious theologian of the remotest excuse for ignoring the tragic element in Christianity. It was in the long Christian centuries and by the styles of persistent Christian behaviour that the ground was prepared for the acceptance of the holocaust of the Jewish people'.

of life's roughest edges.¹ Here we can see that for MacKinnon, creaturely entwinement with the reality of the tragic is something that remains a perpetual possibility for beings living within the time and finitude that created existence implies. Living within time implies limitation, and being subject to forces and dynamics which cannot be easily trammelled by human power and technology. For MacKinnon, such a reality applies even to God's incarnating-act in Christ. Time involves us in limited options and possibilities, with some of those options being good and right; and yet, contingency constrains us, and it further renders us a creatures tied to our pasts, to a history that cannot be undone or obviated.²

However, it should be said here that for all the emphasis that MacKinnon places on the reality of the tragic, and the intractable nature of evil, MacKinnon does not endorse a defeatist viewpoint. Speaking on the religious language used to promote an acceptance of suffering, MacKinnon says that 'The notion of *acceptance* is viciously ambiguous, and can be invoked in defence of attitudes to evil, both moral and physical alike, which very little reflection reveals as at once sterile and humanly unworthy, as indeed something suggesting that Christian faith has a kind of vested interest in human failure and disaster.'³ He has also protested against preachers and theologians who 'fob off men and women crying out for a word of hope with an academically precise pessimism, which seems to glory less in the Cross than in the disintegration of human societies and in the coming of despair.'⁴ But he would continue to say that the reality of tragedy forces us to 'renew our sense of the sheerly intractable in human life'⁵, and to focus our attention on the particularity of human suffering. Hope must distinguish itself from fantasy or mere wishful thinking. The strongly ethical aspects of tragedy, while providing a moral sensibility in relation to suffering, also provide us with the chastening experience of the limitation of hopeful action within creaturely time – a kind of 'ethical version of negative theology' to quote Ben Myers.⁶ To quote MacKinnon on this score: 'Our morality is paradoxically something to which we are constrained and something from which we would be delivered...Christianity does not obliterate the complexity of human life, although it is often presented as doing so. Rather it presents a new context in which the complexity is seen; the problems are as before, but set in the context of Christ's endurance they are transformed.'⁷

At this point, it would be good to point out again how MacKinnon's portrayal of the tragic avoids some of criticism lodged against him by David Bentley Hart⁸. I will not engage again in a full critique of Hart in relation to his view of tragic theology. As I have already said, Hart engages in an essentialising of tragedy, in which he argues that the 'sacrificial logic' inherent in the tragic perspective – particularly Greek tragedy – is not really liberatory at all but rather serves to maintain the socio-political status quo. When it comes to interpreting MacKinnon, Hart basically critiques MacKinnon for interpreting the gospel through the lens of Greek tragedy, thereby implicating him – in Hart's opinion – in the ultimate ontological and political conservatism it entails. However, what one finds when one examines Hart's

¹ MacKinnon, 'Absolute and Relative in History: A Theological Reflection on the Centenary of Lenin's Birth [1971], in *Explorations in Theology*, 68.

² For more on this, see MacKinnon, 'Some Notes on the Irreversibility of Time [1975], in *Explorations in Theology*, 90-98.

³ MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology*, 53.

⁴ *Ibid.* 119.

⁵ MacKinnon, 'Ethics and Tragedy' [1971], in *Explorations in Theology*, 187.

⁶ *Christ the Stranger*, 26.

⁷ *Borderlands of Theology*, 151.

⁸ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 273-294.

interpretation of MacKinnon is not really an attentive hermeneutical process but a variation on the so-called genetic fallacy, a kind of 'guilty by association' interpretative method whereby the implications and trajectory of MacKinnon's theology is equated with his essentialised view of tragedy. In other words, MacKinnon's endorsing of tragic theology ultimately implies, in Hart's opinion, that it be subject to the 'sacrificial logic' imbricated by tragedy – though he does not engage in an analysis of MacKinnon's texts to prove that MacKinnon believed this (he says that 'tragic theology' ultimately implies such a view, even if it does not express it explicitly). Earlier on, we have argued against such a reductive viewpoint in which 'tragic' literature in general is reduced a simple and easily tractable dynamic and tendency.¹ With this central criticism rendered questionable, the bulk of Hart's criticism against MacKinnon is disarmed from having a significant impact on MacKinnon's main insights. One could, following Hart, criticise MacKinnon for focusing (in a traditionally Latin fashion) on Good Friday, upon the dereliction, kenosis, and suffering it implies, without paying the same amount of head towards the Easter vision and its radical implications. However, the same criticism could be reversed against Hart in regard to his minimalist reception of the *theologia crucis* – that is, his eclipsing of the cross in favour of the resurrection (possibly in line with his Orthodox commitments). In short, Hart's criticisms of tragic theology could hold water only for certain forms of tragic theology, based upon particular renditions and scripts found in Greek sources, particularly understood. But if it can be shown that tragic theology should *not* be equated with these sources, then the question of the legitimacy of tragic theology still remains an open question.

Returning to Williams, the remaining criticisms of Hart towards MacKinnon's theology are further problematized, since we have here a person who was and is profoundly influenced by Orthodox theology. He has deeply engaged with Orthodox thought in many publications (including his Ph.D), and has interacted with key figures of Orthodox theology (Lossky, Bulgakov, Florovsky, Florensky, and many others) throughout his career.² Furthermore, Hart's concern with 'ontologizing' evil and violence is preserved within Williams' theology who remains essentially a classical Augustinian (as we have already shown) in relation to the questions of *steresis* and the origins of evil, unlike MacKinnon who is equivocal on this point³.

When we come to John Milbank's critique of MacKinnon⁴, we get something more nuanced, and a criticism that is a little more difficult to address. Milbank's basic problem with MacKinnon's privileging

¹ See chapter one above, but also cf. the compare the Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2003), 1-22 for a criticisms of simplistic reductions which aim at the 'essence' of tragedy.

² On this point, John de Gruchy has suggested to me that Rowan Williams might be privileging a certain trend of Orthodox thought over others due to his preference for the Dostoevskian vision, which emphasises pathos and existential anguish, rather than the more victorious language we find in other Orthodox figures. This is a tantalizing suggestion, though I am not quite sure what to make of it. That Dostoevsky has made a lasting impression on Williams is beyond doubt (his book *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* testifies to this fact). Furthermore, as we will see when we examine his essay 'The Spirit of the Age to Come', Williams does attempt to blend a darker vision of human reality with an Orthodox theology of the Spirit. However, I have doubts that Williams' choice for a certain trend of Orthodox theology over a more 'triumphalist' one can be reduced to personal taste. As he revealed in his interview with Todd Breyfogle ('Time and Transformation', 306-307), it was largely through the influence of Nicholas Zernov and his doctoral supervisor Donald Allchin that he was introduced to Russian Orthodox thought, and it was at the instigation of Allchin that he even embarked upon a dissertation which had Lossky as its central focus.

³ Cf. MacKinnon, *Explorations in Theology*, 103.

⁴ Milbank, "Between Purgation and Illumination": A Critique of the Theology of Right', in Surin (ed.), *Christ, Tragedy and Ethics*, 161-196. This is essay is reprinted without any substantial changes in Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 7-35. The only difference I could find was in his discussion of MacKinnon's dependence on Aristotle (cf. *Christ, Tragedy and Ethics*, 176 and *The Word Made Strange*, 20). It seems that (by comparing these quotes) Milbank has grown more critical of Aristotle as his theology has matured (hence the deletion of 'non-dialectical' from his earlier quote). It should be said here that Milbank is not only focused on MacKinnon in this essay; he aims to counter-act the entire

of the tragic in relation to theology and ethics is that tragedy behaves in MacKinnon's theology in a similar way to the Kantian ethical sublime (as mediated through the tradition of Butler). For Milbank, MacKinnon's focus on 'tragic indecision...occasions a kind of *exit* from the narrative instead of remaining in the plot and seeking for resolutions. One's suspicion here is that it is not that MacKinnon simply *discovers* history to be tragic, but that he *emplots* history within a privileged tragic framework.' The kernel of Milbank's argument here is that MacKinnon's take of tragedy is not historical enough, since it seeks to place tragedy within a presupposed tragic schema that is unable to deal with the complexity of actual history, what one could call the *histoire totale* (though Milbank does not use that term here). From Milbank's perspective, MacKinnon's understanding of the tragic undermines the fact we are ethically constructed within the context of narrative and stories, since (in Milbank's opinion) it take us to the edge of those stories into a more 'neutral' realm in which the vicissitudes of narrative do not impinge themselves. Such 'a piety of the tragic' actually undermines tragedy by making it ultimately a 'speculative' affair¹ rather than something that is engaged with real stories and constituted by a multitude of complex and historical relationships. Milbank argues that MacKinnon converts tragic into something like the categorical imperative whereby 'it is *only* in tragic perplexity that we know we are free, and at the same time are brought up against the very margins of the humanly responsible world. When we do not any longer know how to act, then we discover ourselves as transcendent subjects standing 'above' our usual narratively instantiated characters. But this has to be read as an extremely subtle vision of the aesthetics of the sublime, of the liberal discourse of modernity.'²

Essentially, Milbank is critiquing MacKinnon's view of tragedy as being one more example of the modernist subterfuge to extract ethics from the context of narrative and particularity (hereby echoing the arguments of Hauerwas and other postliberal theologians). Milbank is arguing that MacKinnon's view of the tragedy contributes to the modernist tendency to escape the world of public and rhetorical engagement, thereby reaffirming the liberalism's social imagination in which 'the public sphere of objective, and strictly equivalent justice' is set in opposition to 'the private sphere of forgiving cancellation of fault'.³ Furthermore, Milbank critiques MacKinnon's rejection of the *steresis*, and states it is 'legitimate to ask whether the ultimate Christian perspective may not be one of tragic-comic irony rather than unappeased tragedy – that is to say in *retrospect* it may become possible to determine our

Kantian tradition within theology, through his particular (some would even say idiosyncratic) reading of Aquinas. For a critical discussion of Milbank's interpretation of Aquinas in this essay, see Paul J. DeHart, *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Inquiry* (New York-London: Routledge, 2011), 37-48.

¹ *Being Reconciled*, 156. It should be mentioned here that Milbank here particularly alluding to the philosophical tradition of German Idealism (Kant, Schelling, Fichte, Hegel, etc.), a movement on which he has pronounced some serious skepticism. The relevance of this for Milbank's critique of MacKinnon is that while MacKinnon's metaphysical interest in tragedy supposedly — according to Milbank — aims a thoroughly *realist* recovery of metaphysical language (since 'tragedy' can only be understood as 'tragedy' against a 'transcendent' backdrop), his participation 'the cult of tragedy' (like many other Idealist thinkers) leads to a furthering of the *idealist* cause (though Milbank does not spell out exactly what he is implying by this accusation within the context of this quotation). There are several *prima facie* problems with this generalization, of which I will mention two. Firstly, since MacKinnon's metaphysical interest in tragedy is concerned (as Paul Janz has argued) with the problem of real 'reference' within philosophical discourse, we can distance him from the Kantian exclusion of metaphysics within the realm of pure reason, and therefore from the trajectory of Kantian idealism. Secondly, when Milbank speaks about Idealism, one gets the impression that he is making very sweeping judgements about the movement as a whole, without attending to the particularities of the arguments and the differences between different idealist thinkers, as can be seen, for example, in the difference between Hegel and Schelling on the question of tragedy, or in relation to Hölderlin's rejection of Fichte's theory of 'the Absolute I' in which there is no 'outside' or 'object' ('*Gegenstand*'). For more on this, see Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek*, 71-73; 95-168. For more on Hegel and tragedy, see Migel de Beistegui, 'Hegel: or the Tragedy of Thinking', in Migel de Beistegui and Simon Sparks (eds.), *Philosophy and Tragedy* (London: Routledge, 2000), 10-36. For an excellent discussion of Hölderlin, see Jean-François Courtine, 'Tragic Metaphor', *Philosophy and Tragedy*, 57-75.

² 'Between Purgation and Illumination': A Critique of the Theology of Right', 178.

³ *Ibid.* 179.

failure to attain the Aristotelian mean, or else we may be able to trace these sorts of 'perverse upshots' of apparently desirable action, to a lack of integration in our society, the lack of a sufficiently encompassing social imagination'.¹ What Milbank is saying here is that in order for us to make sense of tragedy we have to reject a view that privileges tragedy as a *backdrop* for a robust narrating of the Christian story.² Furthermore, we should not look for a resolution to the problem that tragedy proposes by retreating from continued engagement with history and social interaction with talk of 'limits', 'the transcendence of the tragic', or whatever disengages us from the continuing story. We should not consider tragedy to be some fundamental background to all our historical dealings, but merely as 'perverse upshots' due to our lack, in thought and practice, of an embracing social vision.

For Milbank, evil (and tragedy) is always the result of some 'lack', 'some sort of symbolic distortion, some sort of imperfect vision', that which is 'ontological predatory' on created being. He writes that 'if evil is not a surd element outside the world-text which human beings write, then within this narrative it can be constantly re-enacted, re-presented, shown up as mere subjectivity, and so contained'.³ Milbank further argues that if evil is not privative on being, and remains a perpetual part of the story indefinitely within 'the context of providence as kenotic suffering', as a continuing 'limit' within which we have to orientate ourselves, then 'kenotic theology itself...may become a new mode of consolation or theodicy' because one is simply resigned to its continued existence in the world.⁴ Like Hart, Milbank is arguing that the tragic vision resigns itself to the way things are, and does not seek to change them; socially speaking, it is inherently Luddite.

However, what makes Milbank's treatment so nuanced is that he does give space for the reality of the tragic to impinge on theological and ethical reflection.⁵ Referencing the work of Stanley Hauerwas, and his resolute commitment to pacifism in relation to complex political realities (like South Africa) Milbank wonders whether the Church can be '...robbed of certain possibilities of realizing certain practices that should define its nature...Here peaceableness *may be* precisely not exercising other Christian virtues such as justice, or even comfort and support of others. In this sort of situation does one not have to say that our action is in a way alienated from itself, such that we cannot evade tragic choices, none of which seems perfectly to instantiate integrated 'practices'.⁶ From this, we can see that while Milbank rejects the attempt to emplot the Christian narrative within a preconceived context of tragedy, he is more open to using tragedy within the context of theological reflection. From this, it can be seen that Milbank has an astute and particularly nuanced critique of MacKinnon and 'tragic theology' that requires a response.

¹ Ibid.

² One could actually go further here and say that for Milbank there is no 'backdrop' for the Christian story since the Christian *mythos* is self-grounding, without any 'foundational' referent. It is groundless (like many other beliefs and philosophies), but it shows its superiority through a rhetorical overthrow of contemporary nihilism by narrating a better and more beautiful narrative of the world, gesturing towards a truth which *shows* itself via narrative, allusion and *mythos* rather than through purely linear argumentation. For Milbank's reflection on this, see Milbank, 'The Invocation of Clio: A Response', 3-13; 41-42.

³ Ibid. 179-180.

⁴ Ibid. 180-181.

⁵ For more on Milbank and tragic theology, see David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo*, 53-87.

⁶ Ibid. 191.

I will not comment on Milbank's interpretation of the Kantian tradition¹ as it impinges on his interpretation of MacKinnon and tragedy² (others like Paul Janz have seriously questioned the Strawsonian reading which Milbank subscribes to³). But I will make some remarks here to point to some problems with Milbank's critique of MacKinnon. My critique will basically take the following form: (1) MacKinnon should not be interpreted as advocating a general tragic, de-historicized 'worldview' but rather someone who sought to emphasise the *particularity* of human stories of suffering. Furthermore (2), it could be argued that Milbank himself (because of this suspicion of any social theory and his emphasis on self-referring narratives) obscures the proper *histoire totale*⁴ into which the story of the church is to be understood. By doing this, his narrative of the church becomes 'idealized' and is unable to account for the way the church learns its language from its encounters (and mistakes) in relation with the world, and also how the Church itself has contributed extensively towards human suffering and 'tragedy'. And (3), while we do need to take account of how tragedy is understood in its wider historical context, and allow for the possibility of resolution in some cases, it just seems difficult for such an insight to be applied in every case. Some stories just continue to resist such resolution. I will unpack these criticisms a bit further.

Firstly, when Milbank says that MacKinnon does not read off tragedy from history and particularity, but rather places them within a presupposed tragic framework, he does not engage with any specific texts to prove his point, but simply makes his suspicion known that he thinks that this is actually the case (based on MacKinnon's Kantian-Butlerian heritage). One could just as well assert (through a reading of MacKinnon's texts) that MacKinnon was doing exactly the opposite, namely that he perceived the particularity of suffering to such a degree that this forced him to 'reject any narrating of history which overcame or harmonized suffering and pain into a presupposed teleological framework. As we know from MacKinnon himself, he rejected any generalized or 'melodramatic invocation' of 'the tragic sense of life' especially when it came to difficult ethical issues (like nuclear armament).⁵ Nicholas Lash, in his inaugural lecture as the Norris-Hulse professor at Cambridge (a position which we took over from MacKinnon himself), remarked that as a student of MacKinnon⁶ he had he had learned from him to embrace a 'passionate preoccupation with the significance of the particular' which counteracted against 'the evasiveness of facile generalisation'.⁷ This personal testimony of Lash points against a conclusion that MacKinnon was (generally speaking) one who engaged in

¹ While Milbank tries to critically place MacKinnon within the trajectory of Kantian transcendentalism, he does not emphasise in this essay the way in which MacKinnon's use of tragedy occurs within a context in which MacKinnon is precisely trying to move *beyond* the strictures of Kantian reason, with hope of returning to a rational discussion of metaphysics.

² It should be mentioned here, in passing, that Julian Young (in *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek*, 263ff.) has argued that we have two philosophical traditions within modernity regarding tragedy: the 'Kantian' tradition of the sublime (Hölderlin, Schopenhauer, Wagner, Nietzsche, Camus etc), and the 'Hegelian' tradition of ethical conflict (Hegel, Kierkegaard, Schmitt, Miller, Žižek, etc.). The first is associated with confronting one with the limitations and finitude of human existence, opening up thereby into reflections or experiences of 'the sublime' (most specifically in the realm of music, as can be seen in Wagner). The second tradition is concerned with the problems of limitation as well, but focuses more upon the moral dilemmas that are placed upon tragic figures. Obviously, these two traditions are not irreconcilable, but they are distinct. In this regard, Milbank's critique of MacKinnon would seem to be directed at what he deems to be the overly 'Kantian' contours of MacKinnon's thinking regarding tragedy (though Milbank would probably have problems with the Hegelian tradition as well). For the sake of this thesis, I do not think placing Williams within any particular tradition is helpful, since he is influenced by MacKinnon's 'Kantian' tendencies, as well as Hegel's more ethical focus (as can be seen in 'The Spirit of the Age to Come', to be discussed shortly), as mediated (in more recent times) through the work of Gillian Rose.

³ Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire*, 123-167.

⁴ For Milbank's thoughts on historicism more generally, see Milbank, 'The Invocation of Clio', 3-45.

⁵ *Borderlands of Theology*, 186.

⁶ He had studied with and worked with MacKinnon for about ten years at this point in time (1978).

⁷ Nicholas Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), 4.

subordinating the particular to any generalization.¹ Williams himself (in his obituary for MacKinnon) made the same observation, particularly in relation to the problem of evil and tragedy.² Now it obviously still is possible that on the issue of tragedy MacKinnon might have undermined (unknowingly) his usual *modus operandi* and proceeded by a method which went against his usual method of investigation. However, such an assertion is difficult to prove, and one could just as easily come to a different conclusion – like Williams himself does in his own contribution to the *Festschrift* for MacKinnon.³

Secondly, on this score, one could also critique Milbank himself as engaging in sweeping historical and theological claims which undermine a resolute attention to the particularities of history (the *histoire totale*)⁴, thereby reversing the critique aimed at MacKinnon back onto Milbank. One could argue that Milbank's own ecclesiology lacks an attentiveness to historical complexity and constitution, especially when it comes to acknowledging the various social forces that formed the church from the outside, as well as modes of learning that constituted its history in which the church, to echo the phrase of Michael Ramsey, has attempted to learn and re-learn 'in humiliation'⁵. Christopher Brittain

¹ This is also confirmed by MacKinnon's friend, George Steiner. For his comments on MacKinnon's strongly historical and materialist sensibilities (implicated in his fascination with Leninism), see George Steiner, 'Tribute to Donald MacKinnon'. *Theology* 98.781 (1995), 2.

² 'Like many, I heard him first at length on the problem of evil; and his Cambridge lectures on this were a paradigm of his style. You might start thinking that here was an issue needing a solution, the kind of solution that a really first-class brain ought to be able to come up with (this is still how a fairish percentage of writers in the English-speaking world seem to approach it). After 30 minutes, you were devastatingly aware that you needed to become more, not less, worried by evil as a theologian; that most available "solutions" were sophisticated ways of helping you to be untruthful about the reality of suffering; and that if the Christian vision had anything to contribute, it might be, not a consolatory word, but a recognition that tragedy was built in to a contingent world. Not even Jesus' choices could be unshadowed: the triumph of the cross is the shipwreck of Judas and the beginning of the pathologies of anti-Semitism. Donald would not allow you to evade the particular, and his hostility to grand schemes that "answered" the problem of evil was much to do with this. What might have been a maddeningly anecdotal style of exposition was really, if you were patient enough to wait, an insistence that what you said theologically had to have something to do with specific pains and horrors', from Rowan Williams, 'Obituary: Donald MacKinnon'. *The Tablet* (March 12, 1994), 31.

³ Williams, 'Trinity and Ontology', in *Christ, Tragedy and Ethics*, 71-92. This essay is now included in *On Christian Theology*, 148-166.

⁴ This is a critique that David Ford makes in his review of Radical Orthodoxy as a movement. On this, see Ford, 'Radical Orthodoxy and the Future of British Theology'. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53.4 (2001), 385-404. A similar critique is made by Jeffrey Stout in *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 100-107, whereby he argues that some of the historical figures Milbank recommends as proposing resources for a 'anti-modern' political practice are abstracted from their context.

It could also be mentioned here that John Milbank's sweeping historical genealogies owe something to Heideggerian methodology in relation to his practice of charting the history of philosophy's reception of Being. On this, see Paul J. DeHart, *Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Inquiry* 1-14. Furthermore, one could also quote here the statement of Gillian Rose when she says that 'From Marx to Heidegger (and before and beyond), it has become *de rigueur* to charge your predecessor with adherence to 'metaphysics', and to claim .your 'new method' to be, exclusively and exhaustively, the overcoming of the tradition. Ethical integrity is reclaimed by each new generation who must murder their intellectual fathers in order to obtain the licence to practise the profession that they learnt from them', in Rose, *Mourning Becomes Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

One could actually say that Milbank (and others within the Radical Orthodoxy movement) have a tendency to engage in what Slavoj Žižek has called 'negative totalization' (see his interview with the *New Statesmen*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvWkWYHmMxg>, Accessed 3/25/ 2014). Within continental philosophy, practitioners of 'negative totalization' aim to retroactively characterise the philosophy that lead up to this moment under a certain 'critical' or 'negative' rubric in which the history of philosophy is understood in a totalized manner, for example under the category 'metaphysics' (Heidegger) or 'the metaphysics or presence' (Derrida). For Milbank, such a category would be 'nihilism'. The problem with such sweeping genealogies is that you can elide particularities and make history (more or less) to say what you want it say. In this regard, it might be beneficial to remember (apropos Milbank and his account secularisation and nihilism) of the advice of Hans Blumenberg when he said in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983), 119, 117 that 'Not only does the secularization thesis explain the modern age; it explains it as the wrong turning for which the thesis itself is able to prescribe the corrective... 'the kind of 'cultural criticism' derivable from the concept of secularization, which hands out "guilty" verdicts in its search for the most distant possible object to which to attach responsibility for a feeling of discontent with the present, that ought to be called to account for irresponsibility in relation to the burdens of proof associated with what it presupposes.' I owe this reference to Paul DeHart.

⁵ For a discussion of this, see Williams, 'Michael Ramsey (1904-1988): Theology and the Churches', in *Anglican Identities*, 87-102. It could be said generally that one lacks a sense of the 'kenotic structure' of the church within Milbank's ecclesiology. There is a tendency towards a triumphalistic tone of speech regarding, on which several people have made comment, alluding to the paradox that 'the ontology of peace' is articulated within the context of 'rhetorical violence'. For this, see Kevin W. Hector, "Ontological Violence and the Covenant of Grace: An Engagement between Karl Barth and Radical Orthodoxy," in Bruce L.

has critiqued Milbank (and Hauerwas)¹ on this score by saying that their respective ecclesiologies are 'eschatologically over-determined', in the sense that that church is constructed according to a 'nonfoundationalist' story that reflects little of the 'external' and complex social forces that formed and are forming to the church. Furthermore, Milbank seems to whitewash the church's history, focusing on the proposed 'peaceful' narrative the church has to offer, rather than the actual history of the church's entwinement with tragedy and its contribution to the suffering of others (e.g. the Crusades, the Inquisition, anti-Semitism, colonialism, androcentricism, homophobia).² Such a critique is echoed by Sarah Coakley as well.³ Reading Milbank's reflections on ecclesiology, one does not catch a strong sense of how the church has learned its language through failure, mistakes and missteps.⁴ Instead, one is presented with an 'idealized metanarrative' of the church, separated from the complexity of the story of the church, including its tragic entanglements, as Rowan Williams in his critique of Milbank and 'postliberal' theology has said.⁵ Elsewhere, Williams has also said that, 'My reservation about Radical Orthodoxy, and my continuing, slight and amicable disagreement, concerns the tragic. Granted that violence isn't primary, it might still be going a bit too far and too fast to say that the church within history achieves the peace it speaks of. Some of the rhetoric of Radical Orthodoxy just seems to come a bit too fast; I think it's important to emphasize that the brokenness, the woundedness of the Christian body in history, at every level, just doesn't go away.'⁶

Nicholas Lash also considers Milbank's theology to have a 'theocratic tendency', regarding particularly his understanding of the relation between theology, metaphysics and philosophy, whereby theology as a discipline (as the queen of the sciences) is seen to absorb other disciplines within its particular story.⁷ Even Stanley Hauerwas in his own response to Milbank's essay on MacKinnon

McCormack and Clifford B. Anderson (ed.), *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 323–46.

¹ It should be mentioned here that while the mutual projects of Hauerwas and Milbank are very similar in some areas (e.g. the emphasis on narrative, a strong critique of liberalism, etc.) they are very different in other areas (e.g. questions of non-violence and pacifism). Hauerwas himself has said that the difference between Milbank and himself is that while Milbank wants 'Christians to win', Hauerwas wants 'Christians to endure'. For this quote, see Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (London: SPCK, 2004), 217n.4.

² Christopher Craig Brittain, 'Against Eschatological Over-Determination', in Christopher Craig Brittain and Francesca Aran Murphy (eds.), *Theology, University, Humanities: Initium Sapientiae Timor Domini* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 150-172. William Meyer has also argued that because of Milbank's Platonic tendencies, and his preference for an ontology of peace over and ontology of conflict, this makes it difficult for him to understand history as precisely something that develops in conflict and tragic limitation; here the story of the church is understood to be 'static' rather than 'dynamic'. For this critique, see William J. Meyer, *Metaphysics and the Future of Theology*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series 126 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 467-471.

³ Speaking in regard to Milbank's rejection of the Enlightenment project and its social sciences, Coakley writes (Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 73-74) that 'the danger of this...theological alternative...is that it invites a nostalgia trip to another, pre-modern age which simultaneously decries the entire Enlightenment programme (forgetting the blood that was spilt to achieve it, and the profound political achievements it garnered). Moreover, in rejecting at the same time the whole project of sociology of religion...it again undercuts the possibility of receiving complicating and embarrassing reports from the ecclesiastical trenches. Not least is this worrying where abuses to women and the underprivileged are concerned, especially given the stringently critical assault that this type of theology simultaneously makes on 'liberation theology' as yet another 'modern' option.'

⁴ In fact (if I am allowed to be a little pugnacious myself), one feels that for Milbank the worst thing that happened ever happened to the church was Ockham and Scotus when the church suffered the fate that univocalism, nominalism, and (thereafter) Kantianism brought upon it, with the more ostensible failures like the Crusades and anti-Semitism being cast aside, and sometimes almost justified (in the case of the Crusades) as can be seen in his reflections on violence in chapter 2 of *Being Reconciled*.

⁵ Williams, 'Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision'. *New Blackfriars* 73.861, 319-326; Williams, 'The Judgement of the World', 29-43. For Milbank's response to Williams, in regard to the tragic, see Milbank, 'Enclaves, or Where is the Church?'. *New Blackfriars* 73 (1992), 348-352.

⁶ Cunningham, 'Living the Questions', 24. One possible reason for this tendency in Milbank's thought (as Christoph Schwöbel suggested to me, in private conversation) probably lies in his penchant for a revival of Neoplatonic ontology as the only serious alternative to an ontology of violence. Within such a schema, all dissonance is ultimately cancelled, and absorbed into the sea of divine *esse*, in which all reality ultimately analogically participates.

⁷ Nicholas Lash, 'Where Does Holy Teaching Leave Philosophy? Comments on Milbank's Aquinas'. *Modern Theology* 15.4 (1999), 333-344. However, it seems that Milbank has taken some of these criticisms to heart, and has clarified his assertions a

argued that in relation to the church and the world, we are *not* ultimately dealing with *one story*, but at the minimum *two*. In Hauerwas' opinion, the church's own self-narration cannot absorb the story of the world.¹ Now, Milbank would probably contest this claim by saying that he is not attempting to absorb the story of the world into the Church, but that he is aiming for something more modest (though no less pugnacious and combative), namely a rhetorical overthrow of the contemporary narrative of liberalism and post-Nietzschean nihilism through a more beautiful vision of the Christian narrative of peace.² However, in practice, one could argue that Milbank moves beyond such epistemological modesty and advocates something more totalizing, and that in practice his theology cannot evade violent dynamics, in which *ontological* violence is rejected in favour of accepting *epistemological* violence and coercion.³ One could argue that Milbank's ecclesiology is simply another rendition of the Lindbeckian 'postliberal'⁴ attempt to absorb the world into the Christian text. For Milbank 'only Christian theology now offers a discourse able to position and overcome nihilism itself. This is why it is so important to reassert theology as a master discourse; theology, alone, remains the discourse of non-mastery.'⁵

On this score, it is interesting to contrast Rowan Williams⁶ in regard to his seminal essay 'The Judgement of the World'. In this essay, he critiqued the totalizing attempt to restrict the possibility of *the world itself* passing criticism and judgement on this church, particularly as this witness of the

little in this regard. It would seem that Milbank now does not affirm any simplistic 'superiority' of theology over philosophy, but rather that philosophy should always be practiced in the ambience of theology. For more on this, John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People*, 19-28. However, his political sentiments (as adumbrated in *Beyond Secular Order*) do still seem to have 'theocratic' overtones, since for Milbank, the ideal political arrangement would be an international commonwealth, in which the Pope and a constitutional monarchy would hold sway (with the monarch subordinate to the priest). How such an arrangement would work is not enunciated, but it would be obviously entail a 'Eurocentric' political order (since it is only within Europe that such a Christian monarchy could have any historical basis).

¹ Hauerwas, 'On Being 'Placed' by John Milbank: A Response', in *Christ, Tragedy and Ethics*, 197-201. It should be said here that by bringing Hauerwas into the conversation here with Milbank that I necessarily endorse Hauerwas' dualistic language between the church and the world, or that ultimately Milbank or Hauerwas are radically different in relation to their respective ecclesiologies. Obviously, Hauerwas' espousal of pacifism is more radical than Milbank. But it could be argued that Hauerwas with his endorsement of the Church defined *over against* neo-liberalism endorses a similar dualism to what we find in Milbank's schema of Christianity versus secular reason. For a critique of Hauerwas on this point, see Nathan R. Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 93-126. For a critique in turn of Kerr's interpretation of Hauerwas, see Daniel Colucciello Barber, 'Ideology and Apocalyptic'. *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 10.2 (2010), 167-172.

² Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 2006). For a critique of Milbank's preference for 'rhetoric' over 'rationalism', see Myer, *Metaphysics and the Future of Theology*, 471-481. Myer argues that there is no rhetorical persuasion without some rational deliberation that cannot simply be reduced to or internalized within the Christian *mythos* (as Milbank constructs it) since to do so either results in arbitrary voluntarism or in a kind of surrender of freedom that is indistinguishable from a blind obedience to ecclesial authority.

³ Tom Jacobs, 'The Problem of Postmodern (Theological) Epistemology, or the Temptation of a Narrative Ontotheology, in M. Lamberights, L. Boeve, and T. Merrigan (eds.), *Theology and the Quest for Truth: Historical and Systematic Theological Studies* (Leuven: Leuven – Peeters, 2006), 61-75. William Myer argues that – ontologically speaking – Milbank's preference for the One over the Many leads to his endorsement of ecclesiastical coercion; see Myer, *Metaphysics and the Future of Theology*, 475-481 for more on this.

⁴ I place postliberal in quotation marks because I am aware that there is no unified postliberal programme, as has been shown by Paul DeHart in his excellent book, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 6.

⁶ Rowan Williams is sometimes referred to as the father of Radical Orthodoxy because of his close engagement with many of the leading figures of the movement (John Milbank, Graham Ward, etc.). In an interview with Rupert Shortt, he stated that he has expressed some of his reservations about the movement as a whole, but that basically, he thinks it is on 'the right lines' (in Shortt, *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005), 18). However, such a statement can be misleading if it is taken to imply that Williams should be included simplistically within the trajectory of Radical Orthodoxy. One only has to take into account Williams' criticisms of Milbank's work, his deep appreciation of Hegel as a positive theological resource, his rejection of 'intratextuality' and his concomitant plea for an ecclesial openness to judgement stemming from so-called 'secular' readers of Christianity to see that we have a distinct trajectory in Williams' work. However, it is admitted that Milbank's theological vision cannot be equated with Radical Orthodox vision *tout court*; one only has to compare the respective work of Milbank and Ward to see that there are some noticeable differences.

church is refracted back to her in the effective histories it produces.¹ Even regarding Christology, he has said that 'the meaning of Jesus is not the container of all other meanings but their test, judgement and catalyst. Jesus does not have to mean everything; his 'universal significance' is a universally critical question rather than a comprehensive ontological schema...A finished account of Christ as containing all meanings would make Christology non-eschatological'.² Such an approach has similarities to MacKinnon's own 'philosophical pluralism'³, particularly as it related to his concept of 'borderlands' and what he has called 'same-level criticism' in relation to the interplay between theology, philosophy, and literature.⁴ Milbank's procedure to absorb the multiplicity of stories (or philosophy in general) into the story of the church can be seen – as Tom Jacobs has put it – as kind of 'narrative ontotheology' in which it becomes difficult to avoid 'violence' or agonistic dynamics of some kind.⁵ Furthermore, one could argue (potentially) that since Milbank subordinates philosophy and rationality to theology in a radicalized manner (at least in some of his writings) it is difficult to avoid the charge ultimately his theology (or his theological practice) is anti-philosophical and anti-rationalistic⁶, though this claim is debatable.⁷ And if Milbank's plea for an oppositional dynamic between 'secular' nihilism and theology, and his radical and totalizing either/or is to be taken seriously, then it is difficult to avoid a kind apocalyptic dualism between the church and world⁸, and thereby (at least in Milbank's construal) world of conflict, violence, and coercion – even if this is done in the name of an ultimate peaceability.⁹ However, if we are to assert a stronger relation between nature and grace (like Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy, have done), then how can be so certain and strenuous in our rejection of secular political institutions, sociology and liberalism? Even though they participate in the sinful order of things, are they excluded from grace and redeeming potential?¹⁰

Thirdly, while Milbank's plea for continuing with the story and its narrative outworkings (despite its tragic inflections) should be given its due, it seems difficult to deny that there are some stories that just continue to resist closure of such a kind. Certainly, it will be admitted that some tragic

¹ Williams, 'The Judgement of the World', in *On Christian Theology*, 29-43.

² Williams, 'The Finality of Christ', *On Christian Theology*, 94. It is precisely this drive towards an eschatological universality that makes Williams' brand of Anglo-Catholic ecclesiology more self-critical, while at the same time maintaining the strongly sacramental understanding of the Church's witness to Christ and the gospel. For more on this, see Williams, 'The Nature of Sacrament' and 'Sacraments of the New Society', in *On Christian Theology*, 197-208; 209-221. A more detailed (and amicably critical) analysis of Williams' ecclesiology can be found in Theo Hobson, *Anarchy, Church and Utopia: Rowan Williams on Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 2005).

³ I have taken this term from Giles Waller's essay on MacKinnon, referenced above.

⁴ MacKinnon, *Borderlands of Theology*, 41-54.

⁵ Tom Jacobs, 'The Problem of Postmodern (Theological) Epistemology'.

⁶ Paul D. Janz, 'Radical Orthodoxy and the New Culture of Obscurantism'. *Modern Theology* 20.3 (2004), 363-405; Myer, *Metaphysics and the Future of Theology*, 450-455. A further criticism which could be lodged at Milbank is his interpretation of Kant's philosophy. This is a point that has been vigorously and thoroughly argued by figures like Janz. One of Milbank's chief criticisms of MacKinnon is his more positive appropriation of Kant's transcendental approach to philosophy, with its supposed ideal of achieving 'pure objectivity', a dogmatic rationalism in which the claims of reason are separated from the realms of sense, experience, and historical contingency. This seems to underlie Milbank's criticism of MacKinnon's 'Kantian' deployment of the experience of the tragic as a transcendental sublime that removes the ethical subject from a continued engagement with the story and narrative of the Christian *telos*. However, Janz argues that Milbank fundamentally misinterprets Kant (making Kant say virtually the opposite of what he does actually say). Janz argues that Kant's critique of pure reason was precisely an attempt to articulate *the limits of reason*, and furthermore that Kant did not aim to separate sensibility and understanding, but attempted to hold them together.

⁷ Cf. 'The Invocation of Clio', 41-42; John Milbank, 'The Mystery of Reason', in Peter M. Candler Jr. and Conor Cunningham (eds.), *The Grandeur of Reason: Religion, Tradition and Universalism* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 68-117.

⁸ Cf. Jeffery Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 107-117. I probably would not go as far as Stout in claiming that Milbank's theology implies an 'enclave' mind-set. However, one could be forgiven for coming to such a conclusion since Milbank's invective against liberal democracy sometimes does have such an 'apocalyptic' tinge to it.

⁹ On this, see Milbank's provocative (even idiosyncratic) reflections on violence in *Being Reconciled*, 26-43.

¹⁰ For a discussion on Milbank (and Hauerwas) in regard to these matters, in which the inconsistency of Milbank's approach is made apparent, see Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 125-148.

occurrences within the lives of people can be resolved within the continuing of their life-story – even suffering of a particular acute kind (e.g. the death of a child, a terminal illness, etc.). It will also be admitted that we should not appeal to a generalised or abstract theory of ‘the tragic’ or ‘necessity’ as some kind of ‘sublime’ escape route from the particularities of our stories, in which possibilities for reconciliation and forgiveness remain possible. Such potential reconciliations would in their enacting thereby – in a fundamental sense – change the way these events were perceived.¹ Furthermore, it will also be admitted that since people are formed by complex narrative and biographical factors, the manner in which evil or tragedy is perceived is might differ from person to person: what might be tragic or unbearable to one person might be bearable for another.² Nonetheless, I remain unconvinced that any or all of human suffering can, apodictically, be assumed to be redeemable or that every human story can be assumed to find some kind of reconciliation within the continuing story. For some, the agony and pain remains particularly lucid, and reconciliation with the past remains elusive.³ Milbank might respond by saying that we cannot look at the human plane since true reconciliation and forgiveness is only possible from the divine perspective and memory of the world. For Milbank (following Augustine and Thomas), since evil has no being (because it is merely parasitic upon being), and since creaturely existence only has being by participating in the divine, it would seem that evil does not ‘exist’ for God but only for created being.⁴ For Milbank it would seem then that it is only the divine perspective that is the ‘true’ perspective, and further that the effects of evil cannot have a place within the God’s ‘memory’ of the world. However, the immediate question that arises here is: if this is the case, if evil has no ‘reality’ for God, and the perspectives of the sufferers are absorbed into the divine perspective, then how would we be able to understand (like we mentioned earlier in relation to Hart) something like divine *compassion*? How are we to understand the God of the Exodus who responds to the cries of his people, and to the God who identifies with our human condition in the incarnation? If the divine perspective does not allow for the perspective of the sufferer, it would be difficult to understand these fundamental motifs of traditional Christian theology. Evil and suffering must have some kind of existential ‘objectivity’ (even though it is ontological null or privative)⁵, if we are to use such language of compassionate feeling, which at a minimum implies that the suffering and hurt of the sufferer becomes ‘real’ for the one expressing sympathy.

¹See Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, 44-60 where we speaks about forgiveness. However, in Milbank’s opinion, it is only God who can ultimately supply forgiveness truly – due to the immensity of the world’s complexity and suffering. However, since evil has no being (Milbank is following the classical Christian tradition here), Milbank goes on to say that evil has no reality for God. And if that is the case, then – eschatologically speaking – the memory of human suffering and disaster will be thoroughly transformed into something fundamentally different because the ‘memory’ of the world will be absorbed into the divine ‘memory’ (since divine forgiveness can change the significance of particular histories retroactively).

²From a more phenomenological perspective, Ingolf Dalferth has spoken of ‘the relativity of evil’ in the sense that evil is always the perversion of something (*von etwas*) for a particular individuals (*für jemanden*). For more detail on this argument, see Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Malum: Theologische Hermeneutik des Bösen*, 86-88.

³This is similar to the comment made by Daniel Colucciello Barber in his review of Eleonore Stump’s book on the problem of evil. For his comment, see Barber, ‘Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering’, by Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). *Religious Studies* 47.1 (2011), 437-441.

⁴*Being Reconciled*, 61-78.

⁵William Myer has argued that Milbank, because of his preference for the One over the Many, and because he holds to a strong theology of participation, tends towards a kind of ‘panentheism’ and even (Myer suggests) a ‘pantheistic monism’ (*Metaphysics and the Future of Theology*, 476) in which ‘The creation is nothing more or other than the unfolding of the Creator’ (Ibid., 463). Such a tendency seems to undermine a genuine theology of creaturely autonomy (in Myer’s opinion), which explains why he does not give significant place to the dignity of human suffering or tragedy since ‘evil’ does not ‘exist’ for God. A theology of divine compassion, however, would have to somehow take account of how God is able to sympathise with creatures and their pain, thereby giving their ‘pain’ some kind of ‘reality’ for God (even if it is seen from a different perspective, and so cannot be said to be ‘co-suffering’ in a simplistic sense).

Furthermore, the spectre of theodicy raises itself here so that the protest of Ivan Karamazov might apply: if the perspective of the sufferer is eschatologically and liturgically ‘absorbed’ into the divine memory, then either the suffering is effaced (as if it did not happen, which is an unacceptable fantasy); or it is transformed within a different perspective (which while possible, needs to take account of the acuteness of certain kinds of suffering – especially ‘horrendous’ suffering within the context of the first person perspective); or some kind of good for the sufferer is enacted in the wake of the suffering itself (thereby raising the question of whether it would be preferable that such a good could be achieved *without* the suffering in question, especially when that suffering is of the horrendous kind). For more Milbank, the question I have is the following: how are the screams of burning children in the Auschwitz crematoria to be so absorbed (either liturgically or eschatologically)? What potential good could be gained? What perspective could justify or absorb their suffering? I will readily admit, of course one has to be aware of the differences between immediate reaction to horrendous suffering (which should not be primarily philosophical but pastoral), and the largely questions of ‘meaning’ that we have to wrestle with after the fact, as the sufferer in some way seeks to integrate such an experience with their wider existential and aesthetic categories.¹ However, the question does remain as to how far such ‘integrating’ experiences can be successfully accomplished, and to whether such a process can be applied generally to all experiences of suffering.

Lastly, regarding MacKinnon’s rejection of the privation theory of evil (as mentioned above already), Williams cannot be placed on the same trajectory as his teacher on this point. As I have shown already, Williams remains pretty much a traditional Augustinian on this matter, so any criticism of MacKinnon on this matter should not be transferred onto Williams. Milbank’s criticism of MacKinnon at this point is justified, if one goes along with the traditional Augustinian opinion of this matter.

I shall end my critical comments here on Milbank and move onto a more positive reconstruction of Williams’ own position on this matter, particularly focusing in this chapter on Williams’ *Four Quartet* lectures. Before we analyse those texts in particular however, I would like to examine an essay Williams wrote shortly before delivering the lectures on Eliot. The reason I would like to do this because they touch on themes that are relevant to our discussion.

3.3. ‘The Spirit of the Age to Come’ (1974)

As already mentioned, Williams wrote this essay in the period in which he was involved in the study of Russian Orthodoxy, and this can be seen in the introduction to the essay where he says that the genesis of the paper lay in his investigations of the doctrine of the Spirit, as is it was expounded by leading figures in this movement, particularly in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century.² The essay, as suggested by the title, navigates around the themes of eschatology in relation to the doctrine of the Spirit, particularly as it relates to the experience of *hope*, an experience in which new possibilities are opened by the Spirit within history, in ‘the sense of the promise of the future which is

¹ On this, see Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Suffering and the Goodness of God*. Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion. (Ithaca – New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 181ff. We will discuss Williams’ critique of Adams later in this thesis.

² ‘The Spirit of the Age to Come’, *Sobornost: The Journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius* 6.9 (1974), 613.

in no sense conditioned or determined by the limits of the present and the past'.¹ This does not mean that history is negated or abolished by this experience. Rather 'a fresh level of God's activity has been manifested in it, and thus new levels of *human* activity have been made possible.'² Williams emphasizes the point that the eschatological work of the Spirit makes available new possibilities within the creaturely order of being, and seeks to distance himself from an eschatology that sets nature and grace in opposition - 'the age to come' *contra* 'the present age'. Such a move goes against a coherent doctrine of creation, as found within the Christian tradition. Furthermore, he wants to say that 'the age to come' is not a datable event within a historical series of events, because then it would be just like any other event within the continuum of time (which it is not)³, and so, as Williams suggests, Christian eschatology does not involve 'a rigidly schematised philosophy of history.'⁴ Instead, the Spirit opens us to hope for new creation in the present time, whereby the present reality is 'infinitely open to the transfiguring and glorifying action of God.'⁵

But what is the context in which we hope? It is here that the theme of tragedy comes into play. Williams says that in the contemporary moment, there is 'an awareness of present reality as divided, fragmented, liable to internal struggle and frustration, an awareness, in fact of the *tragic*.'⁶ Following Hegel's definition of tragedy, Williams suggests that tragedy is not so much the conflict of good with evil, but rather a conflict between competing goods. This is because 'in our world 'good' is not unitary, each of the partial goods appears to have a claim upon us which often seems absolute' and so 'we are sometimes conscious of two or more seemingly absolute demands upon us which are mutually exclusive and incompatible.'⁷ As such, all true moral dilemmas have a tragic quality about them, because in some cases you will be doing harm no matter what choice you make.⁸ After discussing this, Williams seeks to respond to a belief among some philosophers and literary critics⁹ that Christian experience cannot be reconciled with a tragic view of the world. Referencing the work of Donald MacKinnon, Williams suggests that there are resources within the Christian tradition¹⁰ that counteract the tendency to obviate the tragic dimension of experience.

Williams goes on thereafter to reflect on the theme of the Spirit and the Cross. He says that 'any theology of the Spirit...must face the problem of the exegesis of Christ's cry of dereliction on the

¹ Ibid., 614.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 614-615. Because of this, Williams believes that the Church was right to distance itself from the theology of the Montanists, Joachim of Fiore, and the various 'chiliastic' movements - 'Third Age' theologies - that have manifested themselves throughout history, in both religious and secular forms. For more on the history and trajectories of 'Third Age' eschatology, see, Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 85ff.

⁴ 'The Spirit of the Age to Come', 615.

⁵ Ibid., 616.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. Williams has in mind here the tragedy of Antigone, particularly as it has been interpreted by Hegel, but he references other examples drawn from life and history. Williams goes onto schematize the difference between ancient and modern tragedy by saying the while ancient tragedy was concerned with the question 'What is truth?', modern tragedy is concerned with the question 'Who is right?'. It should be mentioned here, however, that the reason for Plato's rejection of the poets from the ideal city (tragedians included) seems to stem largely from his belief that their insight into truth are largely divinely 'ecstatic', inconsistent, and therefore unreliable in terms of proper mode of τέχνη. For Plato, it was philosophy rather that was able to adopt a more consistent practice, being able to distinguish the Good (τό ἐπέκεινα τῶν ὄντων) from evil, truth from appearance. For some general commentary on this, see Dalferth, *Malum*, 370-374; Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek*, 3-20; Sean Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 59-91.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Williams has in mind here figures such Karl Jaspers, George Steiner, and D.D. Raphael.

¹⁰ Williams mentions a favourite example of MacKinnon, namely the fact that in order for redemption to occur, Judas had to suffer damnation.

Cross.¹ In this event, we can see – within a Trinitarian context – ‘the most extreme case conceivable of the tragic gulf between truth and reality. God-as-man, *because* he is existing ‘as man’, is alienated from His Father’.² For Williams, ‘the Incarnation is a necessarily tragic event...for God *enters into* the humanity whose mode of being is God-less-ness.’³ Obviously, incarnation cannot be separated from resurrection, but as Williams says ‘we cannot in any sense imagine that the dereliction is in any sense blotted out by the Resurrection...the *theologia crucis* is a *theologia gloriae*.’⁴ To give a longer quote: ‘When we have faced the Cross, then we may begin to speak about the Spirit, not before; and precisely because the Cross reveals to us the tragedy, the exigency of man’s present mode of being, we must speak of the Spirit as the bearer of a *new* mode of being and thus as a bearer of the eschaton and the New Age.’⁵

For Williams, the transcendence opened to us through the resurrection does not negate the tragic (*contra* the suggestions of Karl Jaspers). If the tragic can be appropriated into artistic representations⁶ as well as philosophical treatments, while *still* remaining tragic, then Williams sees no *a priori* reason why Christianity cannot do the same: ‘if the Church allows full weight to the death of her Lord, it is never in a position to qualify the fact of tragic destruction, catastrophe.’⁷ As such, the communion of believers in the Spirit is ‘a communion in horror and in glory’, because we are still ‘in history, that history where tragedy occurs, and the gift of the Spirit is a gift that increases our vulnerability to a terrifying degree, we are left exposed and humanly defenceless before the universal weight of tragedy’ since the Spirit into which we are incorporated is a ‘Spirit of kenosis’ that translates into our varying contexts the experience of the cross, which is also the experience of glory.⁸ And this is the foundation for an understanding of hope that does not bypass the experience of tragedy within time. The experience of the Spirit is always an eschatological occurrence, whether in suffering or glory, and thereby points to the limits of the present age, opening to us the opportunity to protest against suffering and injustice (of which prayer, intercession, and ‘tragic’ art, play an important part).⁹ Hope is not abolished by meaningless suffering, but continues to remain and an ever-present cry of resistance (like the art form of tragedy itself which acts as a kind of protest against the loss of meaningful existence in history). Resistance and intercession is tied to our existence within a communion of vulnerability and shared suffering in which we are given ‘power and confidence to *act*’ because of the vision of the future put before us.¹⁰ As can be seen from this, Williams is not advocating an

¹ ‘The Spirit of the Age to Come’, 618.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.* 619.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ For more on the theme of artistic representation, as it relates to the theme of the tragic (and particularly the figure of Nietzsche), see David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 89-128.

⁷ ‘The Spirit of the Age to Come’, 620.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 622-623. The biblical logic behind such a statement can be seen (as is well known) in the Johannine theology of the cross whereby the imagery of being ‘lifted up’ has a dual reference towards the glorification and dereliction of the cross. Such a conclusion is widely accepted among NT scholars. For a sample, see Udo Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 694-701.

⁹ ‘The Spirit of the Age to Come’, 623-624. Williams is influenced here by Johann Baptist Metz, whose famous article on memory and suffering had been published in 1972. Metz wrote, regarding the ‘dangerous memory’ of suffering, that ‘the Christian *memoria* insists that the history of human suffering is not merely part of the prehistory of freedom, but remains an inner aspect of the history of freedom’, *The Future in the Memory of Suffering*, 11. Such a conclusion distinguishes such an attentiveness to suffering from fatalism, or sheer hopelessness.

¹⁰ ‘The Spirit of the Age to Come’, 624-625.

understanding of tragedy that endorses quietism and passivity in the face of suffering, but endorses activity and protest when possible. However, Williams steers clear of any kind of triumphalism in which tragedy and suffering are effaced and for the sake of ultimate glorification and eschatological harmonization.

What this essays shows, is that from early on Williams is not only concerned to take tragedy seriously, but that he understands our communion in suffering as also a communion in glory, thereby opening our experience of pain to the reality of hope that protests against the potential meaninglessness that suffering induces. The importance of resistance in all its forms (art, prayer and intercession on behalf of others) is emphasized by Williams in this essay, and shows that his theological construal of tragedy cannot be understood as fatalistic, or that it endorses passivity in the face of suffering. In fact, Williams would argue that tragedy (following MacKinnon and others) is *itself* a form of protest against meaninglessness and a closed historical continuum since it is only in a 'transcendental'¹ dimension that tragedy can have a dignity which does not reduce it to mere triviality.² The existence of 'tragic art' in all its forms can already be seen as pointing in a direction away from meaninglessness and mere passivity, and seems to be involved in a process of active meaning-making and protest.³ By examining this essay, we have given some background to Rowan's thoughts on this matter before we engage more deeply in his reading of the *Four Quartets*.

3.4. The Four Quartet Lectures (1974-1975)

(a) Burnt Norton – A Place of Disaffection

As already mentioned above, Williams engaged quite early in his theological formation with the thought and poetry of T.S. Eliot. During the period of 1974-1975 he delivered the same lectures on two different occasions, engaging in an in-depth treatment of each of the *Quartets*. The following textual summary is based on the second cycle of these lectures. As will be seen, interspersed throughout are Williams' attempts to appropriate Eliot's vision for explicitly theological purposes, and furthermore, such reflections touch on themes related to our topic. While the following analysis below will be the most sustained engagement I am aware of, in relation to these texts, I am not the first to attempt an interpretation of these texts. Rupert Shortt in his biography of Williams deals with them shortly⁴, and Benjamin Myers engages in a short analysis of these texts in *Christ the Stranger*, in a chapter focusing on the theme of tragedy.⁵

It should also be said at this stage that I am not ultimately concerned with whether Williams is successful in his interpretation of the *Quartets* or not. When it comes to assessing his exegesis of the

¹ Cf. MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics*, 122-135 on the concept of 'the transcendence of the tragic'.

² One should compare here Giorgio Agamben in relation to his concept of 'The Irreparable' (found in the appendix to *The Coming Community*), which almost seems to imply passivity before what cannot be altered or changed, but which ultimately points in a different direction. For Agamben, it is only through accepting what cannot be changed, entering fully into the world as it is that we come against limit, and thereby experience the transcendent: 'At the point you perceive the irreparability of the world, at that point it is transcendent' (p. 105).

³ 'The Spirit of the Age to Come', 624: 'the literary form of tragedy is clearly protest, but equally it is protest which is also demand', and therefore hope, demand for the saeculum, the order which is totally different.'

⁴ Shortt, *Rowan's Rule*, 89-91.

⁵ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 21-27.

poetic vision contained herein, I am more concerned with Williams as a thinker and a theologian than with the debate on how the *Quartets* are to be interpreted. Obviously, I believe that his interpretation is compelling in some ways, and sheds light of certain aspects of the text; however, deciding whether Williams is right in his interpretation is not my main concern in this chapter. At the end, I will reference some criticisms of an incarnational interpretation of the *Quartets*, and try to engage them a little, but they cannot be my ultimate concern in this chapter since my aim is expound Williams's theology, rather than the correctness of his interpretation *per se*.

Williams opening remarks in the lecture lay out an ambitious project to depart from the 'majority of opinion among literary critics'.¹ Williams understands the *Quartets* to be an attempt to think about the meaning of the incarnation within history, how this event opens up 'meaning' and 'vision' within time. Williams does make a concession that the language of the *Quartets* is not 'religious' and that it is 'very rarely dogmatic', but he does believe that the incarnation is 'constantly presupposed' throughout the series. One criticism often lodged against the *Quartets* is that it expresses a longing to escape from time, and that therefore rather than expressing a Christian vision of the world, the resulting viewpoint is more Manichaeian than Christian. Williams rejects this opinion and suggests that in comparison with Eliot's previous works the *Quartets* are the most affirmative despite their talk of dereliction and renunciation. He suggests that the *Quartets* rather offer Eliot's 'most serious attempt to work out the consequences of incarnational religion', and Williams goes as far to suggest that Eliot is doing little more than 'proclaiming the gospel'.²

In line with this ambitious project, Williams also wants to dissent from the opinion that the *Quartets* represent a unified, worked out theme, namely that Eliot was unpacking an idea which he had already stated fully in *Burnt Norton*. No doubt this is true in some aspects³ as Williams knows, but to say that the remaining *Quartets* are a kind of poetic midrash on the *Burnt Norton* is a mistake. To support his case, Williams states the well-known fact that Eliot published *Burnt Norton* as an individual poem before he even conceived the tetralogy, and that later he decided to include it in the series.⁴ The *Quartets* may express 'a unity, but they are not⁵ one poem'. Instead, Williams suggests that the continuation of the series after *Burnt Norton* implies that Eliot saw it as 'inadequate in itself, not only inadequate in expression, but inadequate in content, needing not expansion or revision, but the kind of correction, or perhaps, the kind of reply which only another poem can provide.' This means that a verse or passage cannot be lifted out of context, and be said to represent Eliot's 'point of view'. The *Quartets* rather express an experiment in 'dialogue' where 'statements are proposed, explored, and

¹ Williams, *Four Quartets* (unpublished manuscript), 1. From here on, the manuscript shall be abbreviated to *FQ*. Numerals refer to the different sections of the lectures, and the numbers refer to the pagination.

² *Ibid.* On this point, Williams has not changed his opinion even in thirty years since he delivered these lectures. In his interview with David Cunningham ('Living the Questions', 29), he said that 'I spent a long time mulling over the *Four Quartets* in my 20s and 30s. Ultimately it seems what he's doing is quite the opposite of what he's sometimes said to be doing: he is giving a very deep valuation of the self in time, an incarnational picture, with all the ambivalence that incarnation entails.'

³ For example, the insight that 'Only though time time is conquered' is an idea carries on throughout the series, and lays bare the central problematic that Eliot is dealing with (in Williams' opinion).

⁴ For more on this, see Helen Gardner, *The Composition of Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), 14-28. However, Williams would probably not agree with Gardner's interpretation of *Burnt Norton*. The marginalia for this passage suggests that it is written 'contra Helen Gardner'. I cannot determine whether this is Williams' own handwriting, or was added later.

⁵ For the sake of accuracy, I have underlined those words underlined in the text since there are no italics in the typed manuscript.

sometimes, if not rejected, at least qualified seriously'¹ since it is only through 'a multiplicity of possible and provisional statements' that 'a poet [can] point with any precision and integrity to what he [sic] is saying.'²

After these initial reflections, Williams moves onto an exegesis of the text of the *Quartets*, starting with *Burnt Norton*. From the opening lines, Williams says we are presented with an understanding of 'the present moment' which is 'limited and bleak', a moment that is 'utterly immutable, necessarily what it is'. If the future is contained in the present and amounts to 'innumerable determined moments' then time cannot be transformed, there is no redemption or salvation possible: 'the vision of freedom and contingency is an illusion' because we continue to return to 'the immutable present'.³ As the poem continues, Williams says that the second part suggests (more optimistically) that the present itself might offer some kind of 'release' since it contains within itself 'the complete moving pattern of things', 'the circling pattern of the cosmos', 'the dance', 'the still point of the turning world'. But ultimately this vision provides little comfort since it merely protects us from 'heaven and damnation', as we are held between the 'partial ecstasy' and 'partial horror' of the moment. As such, the second section of *Burnt Norton* provides a reply to the first section: 'the present is fixed but there is release; not through a deliberate evasion of the present into the 'world of speculation', but through the grasping the present for what it is.'⁴ This emphasis on experiencing and seeing time for what it is will return again and again in the remainder of the *Quartets*, and in Williams' continuing interpretation of them.

The third section again consists of a kind of rebuttal to section two. The third section describes 'a flickering succession of meaningless happening, at once boring and distracting' in which 'the intense awareness of the present moment' described in the second section two is rejected. In light of this such a perspective, Williams suggests that Eliot is experimenting with the idea that 'the present moment' is not 'a vehicle for 'meaning', but the utter static isolation of knowing one is not free to change the world, knowing that to act or not to act makes no difference.'⁵ While the second section might imply some 'meaning' in which we are reconciled with a cosmic rhythm and pattern of the universe, the third section implies that 'The descent into the real darkness of the present moment

¹ FQ I, 1. Cf. 'Living the Questions', 29: '...what I love about the *Quartets* is precisely what their tide indicates: they're meant to be different voices. Some of those voices are wonderfully lyrical; Eliot has this Shakespearean facility for the memorable compressed lyric...And then he will quite deliberately scramble it, as if you pressed a "scramble" button, and you'll go into an abstract, clumsy mode as if to say, as he does say at one point in the *Quartets*: "That was a way of putting it." Don't listen to the music—just shuffle, clatter, and hear the words going around— don't hang onto that. And that alternation between the lyrical and die fragmented, I think, takes you so *close* to the edge, and to the niche of real poetry.' One can also say with confidence that Williams is using here a dramatic or diachronic method of reading this text, in the same way that he uses the same method to interpret the biblical text. In fact, he explicitly uses the *Four Quartets* as an example of the diachronic method of reading. For more on this, see Williams, 'The Discipline of Scripture', in *On Christian Theology*, 45-47. For more on Williams' hermeneutics and theory of a sacred text, see Williams, 'The Unity of the Church and the Unity of the Bible'. *International Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 91.1 (2001), 5-21; Williams, 'Historical Criticism and Sacred Text', in David Ford and Graham Stanton (eds.), *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004). For a friendly and critical discussion of Williams' understanding of Scripture, see John Webster, 'Rowan Williams On Scripture', in Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (eds.), *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 105-123.

² FQ, 2. It should be said that Williams is not the only one to make such a suggestion regarding the *Quartets*; postmodern interpreters of Eliot have also noticed this point. On this cf. William V. Spanos, 'Hermeneutics and Memory: Destroying T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*' [1978], in Graham Clarke (ed.), *T.S. Eliot: Critical Assessments III* (London: Christopher Helm, 1990), 230-272 for some Heideggerian reflections on this theme.

³ FQ I, 2. Cf. *Burnt Norton* I, 177: 'If all time is eternally present/ All time is unredeemable', in Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963).

⁴ FQ I, 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Cf. *Burnt Norton* III, 181: 'This is the one way, and the other/ Is the same...'

reveals a void, a total helplessness in the face of an impersonal and unstoppable cosmic process.¹ As we can see, already within *Burnt Norton*, there is a reply and response pattern that is mirrored in the rest of the *Quartets*.

The section that follows thereafter is the shortest in *Burnt Norton*, and constitutes a kind of summary of what has been debated so far. Some have sought to find religious undertones in some of the imagery used in this section ('the kingfishers wing', for example), but Williams does not decide either way. At this stage, the language is still has a 'cryptic and ambiguous character'.² In the last part of the poem, Eliot confronts us with 'the actual problem of poetic language, of communication itself' and further, in relation to the conclusion of the poem itself, we should 'not look for straightforward resolutions...but accept its provisional character'. The occurrence of speech brings us back 'decisively back into the world, into time; and it is released into silence by the emergence of form'³, a 'form' in which the end and beginning 'co-exist' in the present and offer a 'total explanation' of 'the whole historical process'. Unfortunately, the present cannot bear this burden since 'The detail of the pattern is movement / As in the figure of the ten stairs⁴ / Desire itself is movement / Not in itself desirable...' The present seeks to impose 'form' because it seeks redemption and meaning, but this remains elusive ('...the Word in the desert') since the present itself implies movement (and so cannot remain still), and redemption can only be found beyond the world in the realm of the timeless (Love is itself unmoving, / Only the cause and the end of movement, / Timeless, and undesiring / Except in the aspect of time...). As a result, 'there is no hope of...perceiving a total pattern' within time.⁵ Language in its attempt to impose form continues to break down and remains fluid and fungible, escaping attempts to circumscribe a solidified pattern.⁶

After bringing his detailed reading to a close, Williams goes on to draw some conclusions and gives some additional theological commentary. In *Burnt Norton* he says we are confronted with 'bewildering tensions and paradoxes, dissatisfied and uneasy'.⁷ Meaning seems to be found in 'the timeless moment' of ecstasy', but from where does it derive meaning if it is cut off from time? Time remains unredeemed, cut off from its source of salvation. Eliot (as well as Williams) is unsatisfied with such a conclusion, which is why *Burnt Norton* marks both a beginning and an end, an end to a certain understanding of the relation between 'historical consciousness' and 'visionary consciousness', and a beginning to a series of reflections which will occur in the rest of the *Quartets*. The dualism present in *Burnt Norton*, a dualism in which time is considered to be a 'waste' is at odds with a Christian doctrine of incarnation. Echoing the sentiments of George Florovsky, Williams says that 'Christianity is the

¹ FQ I, 4.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 4-5. Cf. *Burnt Norton V*, 181-182: 'Only by the form, the pattern/ Can words or music reach/ The stillness...'

⁴ This is an allusion to St John of the Cross

⁵ FQ I, 5

⁶ *Burnt Norton V*, 182: '...Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden, / Under the tension, slip, slide, perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, Will not stay still...' Paul Fiddes suggests that in his part of *Burnt Norton*, we might have *in nuce* the debate between structuralism and deconstruction. On this, see Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 119-123. Fiddes suggests that Eliot does not fall into either category clearly but rather endorses 'the transcendental signified'. On this score, it is worth taking into account that even though Eliot could not have known about Derrida, some of his approaches to writing and language provide some fecund resources for deconstructionists. Here, one can consult Cleo McNelly Cearns, 'Negative Theology and Literary Discourse in Four Quartets: A Derridean Reading' in Edward Lobb (ed.), *Words in Time: New Essays on Eliot's Four Quartets* (London: Athlone Press, 1993), 131-157.

⁷ FQ I, 5.

justification of time'¹ because it is within the framework of the incarnation that history is given a pattern and a meaning. It is precisely this framework which Eliot seeks to work out in the rest of the *Quartets*, according to Williams. The implications of this for understanding Eliot are significant because it implies that we cannot take what Eliot has said previously (in *Burnt Norton*, *Ash Wednesday*, *The Rock* for example) as representing 'Eliot's viewpoint' since the *Quartets* themselves constitute a kind of challenge to Eliot's own previous sentiments on this matter. Williams even uses the language of *μετάνοια* (repentance) to describe the artistic process of the *Quartets*, a continual process of reformation and self-questioning which destabilizes any static or 'totalized' perspective.

The 'paradoxical' sentiments of *Burnt Norton* rule out the solution offered by some 'existentialist theologies' which advocate an 'interiorisation' of history (Williams has in mind here the theology of Bultmann).² Some of the language of *Burnt Norton* (with its talk of the 'moment' and 'timelessness') can be construed to endorse such an opinion, but the internal dialectic of the poem itself counteracts such a conclusion since Eliot is engaged in a debate with himself on these very issues.³ Man cannot be saved outside of time ('Only through time time is conquered'), and any attempt to understand redemption unhistorically must be rejected because it offers 'a false picture of man's subjectivity' and leads to 'an almost schizophrenic cleavage between the historical and non-historical consciousness.'⁴ There will be no meaning to a Christian understanding of redemption unless history is taken into account. And so, *Burnt Norton* poses important theological questions around the issue of faith and history and how redemption, or 'the absolute' can appear in time.⁵ However, at the end of the poem, we are left with 'a blank wall of paradox', an unsatisfactory ending which has to be teased out further in the remainder of the series.

(b) *East Coker – A Wholeness of Vision*

According to Williams, *East Coker* provides 'a very comprehensive statement of the cyclic character of human enterprise of all kinds' and 'the death that is implicit in every 'generation''.⁶ The patterns of birth, sexual reproduction, and death are presented as symbolising the rhythms of life which rather than providing liberation are 'an intensification of imprisonment'. Eliot however conveys such patterns with a lyrical beauty that is ultimately 'an unkind sarcasm at the expense of the reader'⁷ because Eliot (in Williams' estimation) is deliberately stylizing his text in such a way to see if we are drawn to and 'hypnotized' by the form while missing the content of what the poem is actually saying. The conscious stylizing of section one (Eliot's attempt at 'a deliberate tour de force') is followed by section two in which Eliot ostensibly rejects his manner of presenting the cyclic nature of life. In distinction from first section, the part that follows is eminently prosaic and even intentionally clumsy – the point being that language can bewitch us, acting as 'a cushion against the threat of the cosmic

¹ Ibid., 6.

² By mentioning this, I am by no means endorsing Williams' interpretation of Bultmann. Modern scholarship on Bultmann has complicated such an image.

³ Ibid., 7-8.

⁴ Ibid., 8

⁵ Williams is referencing here Ernst Troeltsch.

⁶ *FQ* II, 1.

⁷ Ibid., 1-2.

vortex, the progress towards destruction.¹ There are sentences that explicitly confirm this opinion: 'That was a way of putting it – not very satisfactory:/ A periphrastic study in a worn out poetical fashion / Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.'² The attempt to impose form onto experience always fails, because experience and nature continually outstrip form, and any attempt to impose structure on what is fluid and moving entails dishonesty and unreality regarding the nature of the world. Regularity and security are the result of fantasy because we cannot deal with 'the terrifying emptiness of the world'³ ('...There is, it seems to us,/ At best, only a limited value/ In knowledge derived from experience./ The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,/ For the pattern is new in every moment / And every moment is new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been...').⁴ At the end of this section, Eliot seems to suggest that the only response to such a reality is an acknowledgement of 'what is there', avoiding the temptation to fly into 'a world of speculation', and in the process enter into a place 'where there is no secure foothold'⁵. In such a context, the only wisdom we can endorse is humility, because 'humility is endless'.⁶

The third section begins by expounding the fact that everything we do is unreal and doomed if we think we can 'impose meaning by our achievements'.⁷ Death comes to everyone, and no one is intrinsically more important than anyone else; further, there is not a coherent person in the first place ('Nobody's funeral, for there is no one to bury'). This applies even to the poet and the artist. For everyone, there is a silence and emptiness around which we constantly circle, a vortex ('the darkness of God'), and death is a lifting of a veil, like in a theatre, which reveals the nothingness which illuminates our existence, an emptiness that is ever-present in everything we do. Within an environs such as this, even hope and love cannot be used as an escape route, but are included in faith, which seems to be understood as simply 'a blind non-rational commitment, waiting for what we do not and cannot know'⁸ (...wait without hope...wait without love).⁹ In this context of almost nihilistic language, the theme of ecstasy (and negative theology) returns again, but with a firmer rooting in reality, in 'the way things are', which does not 'soften the impact of the present'.¹⁰ The language of St. John of Cross is clearly evident here ('You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy...You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance...You must go by the way of dispossession...You must go through the way in which you are not').¹¹ The recurrence of this theme here cannot be equated with Eliot's use of the theme of ecstasy in *Burnt Norton* because Eliot has gone through a process whereby the earlier experimentation with the 'timeless' moment in which time is gathered up into a redemptive 'event' outside of time has been rejected as a false solution that leaves time itself unredeemed. Here, at the end of section three, despite moving through the experience of darkness and meaninglessness, Eliot

¹ Ibid. 2.

² *East Coker* II, 186.

³ *FQ* II, 2.

⁴ *East Coker* II, 186.

⁵ *East Coker* II, 186.

⁶ Ibid. Williams suggests (*FQ* II, 2) that such a response has similarities with Simone Weil's concept of 'attention'. For an exemplary exposition of this theme, see Weil, *Waiting on God*, (Glasgow: Collins, 1977).

⁷ *FQ* II, 2

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ *East Coker* III, 188.

¹⁰ *FQ* II, 3.

¹¹ *East Coker*, 188-189.

seems to be articulating the most affirmative statement we have seen so far in the poem. The negative way of the 'dark night'¹ offers a possible avenue for making sense of the apparent emptiness of life. As such, the connection between the *Quartets* and negative theology seems undeniable at this point.²

The fourth section continues by suggesting that we accept the death that is 'the precondition of our salvation' because God himself shares the same sickness and is vulnerable to 'the destructive force of the historical vortex'³. God bleeds as we do, and this opens us to the experience of God's compassion and co-suffering ('The wounded surgeon plies his steel/ That questions the distempered part;/ Beneath the bleeding hands we feel / The sharp compassion of the healer's art / Resolving the enigma of the fever chart').⁴ The imagery of the cross, Good Friday, as well as Eucharistic imagery pervades this section of *East Coker*. In the cross, God has subjected Godself to time, change, and death – and as such our faith, our waiting, is grounded upon God's own submission to 'darkness and meaninglessness'⁵ because in order for God to heal our wounds, God must be wounded. This means that it is only through enduring the pain and darkness of history that we can come to healing ('Our only health is the disease....to be restored, our sickness must grow worse').⁶

Section five starts with an autobiographical note, referencing the wasted 'twenty years' in which he has tried to use language to grasp a 'wholeness of vision'⁷ and has seemed to have failed. According Williams, there is a deeper 'humanism' to these lines than almost anywhere else in Eliot's poetry.⁸ The imagery of a continuing journey that starts from where we are at⁹, and continues to acknowledge 'Not the intense moment/ Isolated, with no before and after,/ But a lifetime burning in every moment' in which there is 'perhaps neither gain nor loss...there is only the trying...' and a moving into 'another intensity...a further union, a deeper communion/ Through the dark cold and empty desolation.'¹⁰ The 'tragic' quality of the whole poem is acknowledged by Williams (echoing the sentiments of Helen Gardner): there is an opening to 'a possibly hopeful future' but it involves our 'casting out into the deep, leaving cheap and facile explanations behind', in which 'risk and real insecurity' must be faced in light of God's own vulnerability.¹¹

¹ We can already see here Williams' concern with locating the 'dark night' and an experience of the 'negative' moment within the concrete experience of history. For more on this, see Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, 80-84, 99-104. Also, cf. his thoughts on 'the risk of a negative theology in abstraction' and the 'de-politicized aesthetic' inherent in some postmodern theorists, which is suspicious of engaged political negotiation and historical engagement. On this, see Williams, 'Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity', in *Wrestling with Angels*, 29-33.

² For more reflections on the relationship between the *Quartets* and negative theology, Cearns, 'Negative Theology and Literary Discourse in *Four Quartets*: A Derridean Reading'.

³ FQ II, 3.

⁴ *Easter Coker* IV, 189.

⁵ FQ II, 4.

⁶ *Easter Coker* IV, 189.

⁷ FQ II, 4.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *East Coker* V: 'Home is where one starts from.'

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ FQ II, 5.

(c) *The Dry Salvages – Abandonment and Risk*

Williams accords the theme of 'risk' a significant place in this poem, a fact which should be seen as 'a protest' against the drastic implications of *East Coker*.¹ Williams admits that it is a difficult poem and that in certain sections it is badly written, but he tentatively argues that the style is result of 'an ironic adoption of a certain style of voice and belief, not wholly absurd or wholly contrary to the 'voice' of *East Coker*, but hesitating, qualifying, drawing back from the full seriousness of *East Coker*.'² The opening of section one again plays with the themes of cosmic rhythms, this time using the imagery of a river and the sea. The river 'within us' points to 'the constant and constantly forgotten movement of a sub-rational pattern in ourselves' which awakens us to 'an alarming vision of the chaotic and inexhaustible life of the 'sea' outside us'.³ He goes on to say: 'The conscious mind, in its attempts to discern a pattern intelligible to itself, succeeds only in immobilising 'subjective' time, so that past and future become equally meaningless, swallowed up in a blank, featureless and interminable present; while the progress of the sea's time continues relentlessly. Only the bell out at sea marks any kind of advance, and it is a movement which has nothing to do with us, with our consciousness and volition.'⁴ Here, the disaffection found in *Burnt Norton* is recalled and the problem is raised in relation to the problem of how 'wholeness of vision' (*East Coker*) is possible when there is 'too deep a dissociation between conscious human subjectivity and the rhythms of non-conscious life'.⁵

The second section of the poem has been criticized for its 'forced rhythms and unnatural or even meaningless locutions' but Williams suggests that we should consider 'the occasional weakness or carelessness as an intensification of the overpowering sense of lassitude, helplessness, and defeat in the lyric'. These lines are meant to be 'incantatory, even soporific, an almost dreamy lament' which continues until we are woken up by 'the monosyllabic roughness of the penultimate lines'⁶ ('Clangs/ The bell.').⁷ Here the seeming pointlessness of human endeavour is expounded, and death is described as 'God' because it seems that within this context physical death can provide 'the only imaginable liberation'. Here, talk of the 'Annunciation' or the event of God-becoming-flesh as providing meaning is questioned because if 'the movement of the world is so separate from human life, thought, aspiration, the existence of God-as-man can hardly be supposed to make any difference'.⁸ However, in the second part of this section, a more complex picture seems to be forming, history is not merely a sequence of ecstatic moments: 'The impersonal rhythm of the river does...preserve a human history, even if it is only a history of failure and agony and meaningless 'wreckage'...There is something, and not merely the ensemble of ecstatic moments, which the encroaching of the 'sea' does not destroy or render trivial and futile: a more complex history, of varying subjective significance, but unquestionably there, 'given', just as much as the sea is 'given'.⁹

¹ Ibid. III, 5

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 5-6.

⁵ Ibid. 6.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *The Dry Salvages* I, 193.

⁸ *FQ* III, 6.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

In the third section, Eliot reflects further on the movement of time: 'The pattern is movement, movement, change, is our mode of existing.'¹ In this movement, there is no healing provided by time ('...time is no healer'²) because 'the mere passage of time does not wipe away sorrow or hurt'.³ And so, we given the injunction to 'Fare Forward', that is 'moving from moment to moment in a continuous awareness that does not project fantasy on to past or future; a self-renouncing contemplation of the temporal world of which we are part, in every moment.'⁴ Such a moment opens us to the experience of death and abandon ('...the time of death is every moment'⁵) in which we refuse 'to hold on to the illusion of being static subjects with a 'real' existence in an extended 'present' from which we can survey the present moment with detachment. This is what we are called to do: not to be detached in this sense, not to try and stand out of our lives, but to live in the moment, to abandon ourselves to the present moment' in which we trust that the 'renunciation of system-making is our only road to sharing in the life of our fellows.'⁶

Section four is the shortest section in the poem and constitutes a prayer for the casualties of the sea. The prayer is addressed to the Virgin ('the Queen of Heaven'), the same one who saw her son go the way of the cross. According to Williams, in his interpretation of these lines, the event of the incarnation opens up the possibility that every moment, each portion of history is now open to 'the real presence of God'. This does not change what history is: 'the sound of the bell does not change, it is only heard in a different context, a different world of meaning'.⁷ The incarnation does not permit us to view the world through the eyes of fantasy, but it does allow us to place history in a context that does provide some kind of meaning.

The last section of the poem seeks to list various 'fantastic' interpretations of history. The language covers fields that range from psychoanalysis, fortune-telling, and drug use. All of these are seen as examples of attempts to escape historical experience, to impose a pattern which is not there. And yet, reference to the 'saint' and the 'The hint half-guessed, the gift half-understood, is Incarnation' does point to the possibility of a *telos*, an aim in history, which will probably not come to completion in our life time, but does point to something we can hope for – even if that hope is nothing more than contributing in some way to the lives of others ('The life of significant soil'⁸). And so we continue to journey, we continue trying ('For most of us, this is the aim / Never here to be realised; / We are only undefeated/ Because we have gone on trying'⁹).

Williams concludes the lecture by summarising the themes of the *Quartets* thus far. As has already been said, within the *Quartets* themselves, there has been a movement away from the 'ecstatic' solution of *Burnt Norton*: in *East Coker*, the solution to the problem or time is a sheer waiting in 'hope' and 'love' while *The Dry Salvages* points towards an abandonment of security, and entering a path of risk that has its basis in the incarnation. There is 'the threat of sheer chaos, of meaningless and all-

¹ Ibid..

² *The Dry Salvages* III, 196.

³ FQ III, 7.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *The Dry Salvages* III, 197.

⁶ FQ III, 7. The influence of Weil and de Caussade is influential regarding what Williams has to say here. Williams makes reference to the fact that Eliot read a lot of Weil, especially in his later years.

⁷ Ibid. 8.

⁸ *The Dry Salvages* V, 200.

⁹ Ibid.

engulfing flux' and yet we are promised something more: 'the vision of time in the hands of God, as the means of our purification, the apparently impersonal rhythms of the non-human and pre-human environment as reflecting, pointing to God's action in history' and more significantly 'God's passion in time' in which 'time is revealed as 'in the hands of God' not by any unquestionable, perspicuous and triumphant epiphany, but in the shipwreck of a human life'.¹ He goes on to say, expounding this theme of divine passion by saying

'God, wounded as we are wounded, existing as a human being in time, is revealed as compassionate, in the strict sense of the word: he suffers fear, darkness, and meaninglessness, exactly² as we do. And if God is seen as voluntarily joining us in our condition, His whole activity, of creation as well as redemption, is revealed as 'compassionate'. The 'kenotic' impulse which brings God into time as man reflects the 'kenosis' of creation, the initial self-abandoning of God to darkness, to a freedom which He makes to be other than Himself out of love. The darkness of created temporal existence is sustained at every point by this kenotic compassion of the Creator. God's 'acceptance', in creation and incarnation, calls men to respond, by themselves accepting the same darkness, the same death, mirroring the self-renouncing act of God: so that through the darkness we may touch the hands and know them as healing...God is present beyond the chaos of temporality, withdrawn on the far side, yet with us in our own launching into the deep. God's effectual absence from temporal process, the absence of an overruling power evident in the contingencies of history, is, paradoxically our reason for accepting, embracing this history, grounded in the paradoxical presence and absence of God³ in the life of Jesus – present only as hidden and ineffective, in the last analysis, hidden on the Cross.'⁴

To sum up what has been said in the *Quartets* thus far: we have seen that, as the *Quartets* have progressed, the solution to the problem of time suggested in *Burnt Norton*, the ecstatic moment outside of historical flux, has been rejected as unsatisfactory since time itself is left unredeemed. *East Coker* in response to this problematic sought to emphasize an entering into history, an embrace of death, and a further entry into the 'dark night' in order for a wholeness of vision to appear, one not circumscribed by speculation or fantasy. Such a movement is energized by the posture of waiting in faith and love, not by asserting an imposed order on to time, or by engaging in fantastical projection. *The Dry Salvages* sought deepen further the insights of *East Coker* by suggesting that our living in time involves risk and abandonment, which opens us in a minimalist sense to hope, a hope in which our lives may contribute to the lives of future generations. With this, we move onto the final poem of the series.

¹ FQ III, 9.

² This 'exactly' is problematized by Williams later thought in this area. For more on this, see Williams, 'God', in David F. Ford, Ben Quash, Janet Soskice (eds.) *Fields of Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 83-89.

³ For more on the theme of paradoxical presence, see Williams, 'Between the Cherubim', in *On Christian Theology*, 183-196.

⁴ FQ III, 9.

(d) *Little Gidding – The Crowned Knot of Fire*

According to Williams, *Little Gidding* has ‘a certain finality’ about it – not only because it concludes the cycle of poems but also because it was one of the last poems Eliot wrote.¹ Williams suggests that it represents Eliot’s closest approach to ‘a reconciliation with language’.² More than the other poems, *Little Gidding* attempts to assert a strong emphasis on historical particularity, respecting the fact that even though ‘history in itself is silent about God’, it does point to God. In Williams’ estimation, interpreting Eliot’s intention (through some Wittgensteinian lenses), preserving the ‘silence’ of history may in itself be revelatory because it allows God to make Godself manifest. Such an opinion finds basis in what the earlier poems have said about the darkness and silence of God in history, and further, how the incarnation and death of Jesus point to God, even within absence and apparent Godlessness. Such a silence can be ‘revelatory if it is allowed to be itself and not distorted through the prism of system-making and ‘explanation’, the struggle of the ego for conceptual control of the world.’³ Further, the emphasis in the poem on historically particular places and events has provoked many readers to see the poem as an ‘icon’ of ‘sacramental Christianity’.⁴

The poem opens with a reflection on ‘Midwinter spring’, the experience of a warm day in midst of winter’s frost. The occurrence of such an event seems to provoke the conclusion that generally it is possible to find some warmth and comfort, despite the coldness and deadness of winter. And further, speaking more metaphorically, might we not also, if we look close enough, find comfort and consolation when death seems to surround us. ‘Midwinter spring’ still remains a part of the seasonal changes and the natural cycles, and yet it might point to a particular event from which comfort may spring – a ‘pentecostal fire/ In the dark time of the year’⁵. Such a unique and particular event can however in its ‘concrete form’ become ‘the indispensable vehicle of the unchanging significance. Independently of our approach, when we come and where from, there is an objective continuity of meaning in this place: objective because it is in no way our creation.’⁶ In the words of the poem itself, this punctiliar event is not a construct of our fancy because ‘...what you thought you came for / Is only a shell, a husk of meaning / From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled.’ And further: ‘If you came this way, / Taking any route, starting from anywhere, / At any time or at any season, / It would always be the same’.⁷ In light of such an event, we have to abandon ‘Sense and notion’ and go the way of prayer and attention to the ‘intractably given’. The way of prayer is the way of surrender because it constitutes ‘a non-conceptual response’ to the ‘given’, one that is ‘deeper than any ‘conscious...act’.⁸ Through attention to the ‘given’, the sheer historical ‘thereness’ of the world, we can discover that ‘...the communication / Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the

¹ It should be mentioned here that while the first three poems were written in a relatively short space (a couple of months collectively), *Little Gidding* itself took more than a year to write. For more details on this, see Helen Gardner, *The Composition of Four Quartets*, 14-28.

² FQ, IV, 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Little Gidding* I, 201.

⁶ FQ IV, 2.

⁷ *Little Gidding* I, 201-202.

⁸ FQ IV, 2

living.¹ Here again we have a reference to 'the timeless moment' which 'Is England and nowhere. Never and always'² but again we cannot equate this with ecstasy or fantasy because the 'moment' is tied to a specific time and place, namely England, and the here and now in which history has reached a specific point.

The second section of the poem continues the theme of historical particularity, and it draws its imagery from Eliot's experience as an air-raid warden during World War II. Eliot alludes here to Heraclitean imagery (air, wind, fire, earth) to make a slightly different point (than Heraclitus that is) about 'the destitution of human existence and human effort.'³ It is also well-known that this section of the poem is influenced by Dante (particularly the *Inferno*), but further it seems that there are allusions to other poetic figures as well. The section describes Eliot meeting 'a familiar compound ghost'⁴ (who seems to be an amalgamation of various poets and voices), who along with Eliot had a concern for speech, and it is was such speech that 'impelled us / To purify the dialect of the tribe'⁵, an attempt which is revealed, according to Williams, as 'frustration and waste'⁶ since time has shown – retrospectively – that all attempts to purify language fall far short of their goal, because hidden motives and dynamics are revealed in the process which question the earlier attempts at purification.

In section three he returns to the theme of historical particularity in which we 'recognise things as significant in themselves, as not depending on us for their importance'⁷. And further: 'Particularities, concrete finite realities, of necessity have their imperfections, yet they unite, in a pattern of unified beauty.'⁸ However, such a perspective of unity and beauty is only seen as we look back since unity, is 'a function of our perspective as heirs of the world'. Meaning is 'present in every moment of time; but it is for others, it is never accessible in the present to the individual subject.' As such, this section constitutes one of Eliot's 'most careful and honest passages, a decisive turning away from any kind of archaism, while affirming most positively the authentic value of the past'.⁹

The fourth section is in Williams' estimation is the 'finest of the many superb lyrical passages' found in the *Quartets*. The imagery here, of 'The dove descending breaks the air / With flame of incandescent terror' in which we are placed with '...the choice of pyre or pyre - / To be redeemed from fire by fire'¹⁰, points both to the events of Pentecost and the bombing of London during the war. As such, metaphorically speaking, we have put before us two understandings of history: is it 'the vortex of annihilation' or 'the cauterising iron of the divine surgeon'¹¹. We cannot escape the question, nor find solace in some ecstatic moment removed from history ('...human power cannot remove'¹²); rather 'We only live, only suspire / Consumed by either fire or fire.'¹³ There is no other choice before us. According to Eliot, such an experience is founded upon the working out of Love in history (presumably a reference to God). Williams goes on to comment and say: 'The Incarnation validates history, indeed;

¹ *Little Gidding* I, 202.

² *Ibid.*

³ *FQ* IV, 2.

⁴ *Little Gidding* II, 204.

⁵ *Ibid.* 205.

⁶ *FQ* IV, 3.

⁷ *Ibid.* 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Little Gidding* IV, 207.

¹¹ *FQ* IV, 4.

¹² *Little Gidding* IV, 208.

¹³ *Ibid.*

but what this means in practice is that it condemns us to history, to unresolved tensions, to the clash of apparent absolutes, to puzzlement and darkness, failure, death, all seen as the only mode of created existence possible, and to the only vehicle of salvation possible'.¹ This manifestation of Love is strange, but as we have come to expect in the poem 'our expectations are wellnigh [sic] bound to stand in the way of clear and true vision'.²

In the final section of *Little Gidding*, the themes of the 'beginning' and the 'end' resurface again, alluding particularly to *East Coker*. Reference to 'the end is where we start from' implies that 'death, silence, darkness' are 'our initiation into the world of meaning', are 'our birth out of the womb of humility'.³ Reflecting this reality, a reconciliation with language is possible because it can 'dance' to 'the measure of the world, reflecting and respecting its ambiguities and silences', and can even reflect 'a kind of death'⁴ since 'Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning, / Every poem an epitaph'.⁵ Williams goes on to say that, according to Eliot, we must 'accept and share the flux of the world, the process of generation and corruption, accepting and sharing even in moments of utter failure, destitution, and extinction' since it is through this process that we can experience 'our redemption from the prison of temporality'.⁶ This redemption does not amount to 'the abrogation of history' since 'A people without history / Is not redeemed from time' because '...history is a pattern / Of timeless moments'.⁷ These 'timeless moments' form a 'totality' of 'all possible historical configurations, each one significant', and are 'timeless' in the sense that they constitute 'meaning for others' outside of its 'form of limitation'. Taking this into account implies that even when past historical events, people, and individuals seem to end in failure, they have made 'the place what it is for those who succeed' and have created through their death 'a vehicle of meaning'.⁸

Thereafter, Williams moves to a conclusion of the lecture series. He writes that throughout the *Quartets*, we have 'learned to recognise the hand of love in history, drawing us onwards towards death which will 'fructify in the lives of others', calling us to continue on our way in 'unknowing' and trust', in a continued 'exploration' which will find its goal in 'the full acceptance of our starting-point – our selves [sic] in our present condition... There is a final 'retour-en-soi', in which we learn fully to 'live our own subjectivity' in each moment, to live in full awareness of where and who we are, which is the root of all our action and speculation'.⁹ Such a subjectivity, as should be realised now, is not an attempt of the subject to escape from history into a 'timeless' moment since even that 'timeless', ecstatic moment is now included in 'the crowned knot of fire', along with other moments and events, and is given its due respect and attention. As Williams has reiterated throughout the lectures, there has been a movement away from the vision of *Burnt Norton* as providing the solution to the redemption of time. *Burnt Norton* was characterised by 'a sense of fatality in the fixed, given character of the present moment' which results in 'the need for redemption outside this structure'. But as Eliot moved through the *Quartets*, he realised that this conclusion was unsatisfactory. As Williams

¹ FQ IV, 5.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Little Gidding* V, 208.

⁶ FQ IV, 5.

⁷ *Little Gidding* V, 208.

⁸ FQ IV, 5.

⁹ Ibid.

summarises: the *Quartets* constitute ‘an extended exploration of man’s historical consciousness; and the significant modification that occurs in the course of this exploration is that man [sic] ceases to be seen...as a subject ‘over-against’ his historical environment’. Instead Eliot offers ‘a picture of man as irrevocably bound to this environment’ in which ‘authenticity’ is not found by ‘the act of the heroic individual defying the enmity of circumstance, but by living through and with circumstance’.¹ And all this is grounded upon the fact – in Williams’ view – that the *Quartets* move towards ‘the acceptance of historical ambiguities by way of an incarnational theology’.² However, as we have already mentioned before, this is done without explicit reference to ‘God’ (only *East Coker* does this). In Williams’ estimation, this points to the fact that the ‘theology’ of the *Quartets* is ‘pre-eminently, negative, apophatic’ not only because there is reference to the language of St. John of the Cross, but also because ‘they are themselves, in their entirety, an essay in ‘apophatic’ statement’, that the entire sequence of poems constitute ‘a search for the silence within speech’.³

But does all this talk of negative theology ignore ‘the revelatory aspects of the Incarnation?’ In Williams’ opinion, Eliot refuses ‘to operate with any simple notion of revelation that might solve this problem’ and that his refusal of explicitly theistic language is a testament to his ‘success’ in dealing with the problem since ‘the explicit introduction of theistic language would be, in his terms, an attempt to ‘get behind’ the world to a God uninvolved in it, and thus a denial of the incarnation itself. If God is involved in the world, then it is a world in which there are no absolutely self-authenticating marks of His presence; and if we are to be true to the world, we must represent it as it really is, in its practical ‘Godlessness’’. For Eliot, ‘‘the place of ‘meaning’ is the senseless flux of history, and the place of the Incarnation is the place where God is overwhelmed, defeated, by time. God is known as active in time only in His passion in time.’⁴

This leads Williams to reflect on the question of the historical Jesus⁵ (a question as hotly debated then as it is today). In this text, Williams believes that the life of Jesus ‘cannot compel faith’ and may even be ‘the object of doubt as much as faith’. Jesus continues to remain a σκάνδαλον (scandal) and a point of κρίσις (decision, judgement) since the manifestation of God in time always carries with it the paradoxical quality of ‘sharing in the general characteristics of time – the absence of obvious and unambiguous theistic references’ and as such ‘there will be no relief, no solution, or total clarification within history’ in relation to this problem.⁶

Concluding the lectures, Williams reflects on the problem that this lack of theistic imagery has on our interpretation of the poem. As has been already mentioned, some interpret Eliot’s reflections in the *Quartets* to be little more than a thinly-veiled Manichaeism. Others, however, take the opposite route and interpret the poems as a ‘labyrinthine Christian cryptogram’ in which every line must contain some hidden theological ‘message’.⁷ Williams rather seeks to move between these two poles and suggests that Eliot has ‘imaginatively embodied his belief so faithfully that its theological or dogmatic

¹ Ibid., 6.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ Ibid. Williams makes reference here to Bonhoeffer, and his concept of ‘religionless Christianity’.

⁵ For Williams more mature reflections on this topic (with a good debt to Kierkegaard and his reflections on ‘paradox’) , see Williams ‘Looking for Jesus and Finding Christ’, in D.Z. Phillips and Mario van der Ruhr (eds.), *Biblical Concepts and Our World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 141-152.

⁶ FQ IV, 8.

⁷ Ibid. 9.

structure is left almost totally unspoken'. Furthermore, if the theological presuppositions are accepted, some may consider Eliot's interpretation of the incarnation to be 'bleak and pessimistic', but what Eliot is attempting to do is to expound a *theologia crucis* in which 'darkness and defeat' are used for our liberation, in which in spite of everything 'we call this Friday good'¹ so that while – admittedly - the vision of *Quartets* is ultimately 'tragic' it is not 'pessimistic'.²

Such reflections lead Williams to talk about the contemporary situation of the church within the world: the church has to be awakened again to its call to 'poverty and humility', and theology has to take into account 'the ambiguities inherent in faith' without seeking refuge in 'rationalism' or 'reductionism' which seek to eliminate 'the incarnational paradox'. And he goes on to say that only 'if we are ready to look honestly at the world's dereliction and understand what is involved in claiming that this is the theatre of God's action, can we begin to talk about transfiguration and healing; only when we have some idea of how difficult it is to speak of God's action at all can we intelligibly speak of His saving action.'³

3.5. Summary

We are in a position now to summarise what Williams has been saying thus far. Throughout the lectures, Williams argued that we have to read the poems as a dialogue of voices⁴, rather than a single developing line of thought. As the *Quartets* progress, there is a process of revision, questioning, and dialectic that continues to unfold. This means that we need to be reticent about assuming that a particular verse or passage represents Eliot's viewpoint, without taking into account the whole movement of the poems themselves. We have seen that each poem seems to develop a certain theme that is formed in response to or in contrast to the poem that preceded it.

Burnt Norton response to the meaninglessness of time came in the form of the ecstatic, timeless moment in which meaning was to be found - a moment outside of time, and the historical continuum. However, *East Coker* responded to this by saying that such an escape does not solve the problem of how time *itself* is redeemed. We live as historical beings, and if history in itself cannot be redeemed, then it means that redemption will not reach us either. The perspective *East Coker* sought to develop was that a redemptive vision can only be glimpsed if we accept the way things are, by entering more fully into the meaninglessness and darkness of history, in hope that some kind of healing and redemption may be experienced and glimpsed. Such a perspective is grounded upon the narrative of divine incarnation – 'the wounded surgeon' – who enters into history fully in order to redeem it. To quote Ben Myers, in his summary of the lectures: 'God's loving endurance of the world produces a new and redemptive vision of what is, in itself, tragically disordered.'⁵

¹ *East Coker* IV, 190.

² *FQ* IV, 9.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Robert Vosloo has suggested that Williams' emphasis here on the dialogue of voices might draw on his engagement with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, as we can see operating in his later work on Dostoevsky. However, Williams makes no explicit reference to Bakhtin within these lectures, and his mastery of Russian at this stage of life was by no means dextrous; he struggled through the Russian texts of Lossky and Bulgakov during his doctoral studies (cf. Breyfogle, 'Time and Transformation', 307). Bakhtin's seminal text on Dostoevsky was only translated into English in 1984, but Williams could have been familiar with the French edition which was already published in 1929.

⁵ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 24.

The Dry Salvages however sought to emphasize the disjunction between humanity and the natural orders of the world. The world and its movements seem to carry on, impervious to the existence of humanity. In this context, the question is asked: how can the incarnation make a difference when the wheel of nature and fortune continues to turn without consideration for us? Despite this challenging question, the poem does suggest that there is a story preserved by nature, by 'the river' - a history of disaster and wreckage, but a *history* nonetheless. In this context, our response cannot be to escape these movements since that would be only a flight into fancy, into the 'world of speculation'. Our response can only be to accept risk and abandon ourselves to the seeming 'Godlessness' of time. Again, this done in reference to the incarnation, and the dereliction of the cross ('The hint half-guessed, the gift half-understood, is Incarnation).

Little Gidding is the most hopeful poem of the series. It suggests that while history may seem to consist in nothing more than death and dereliction, there remains the hope of 'Midwinter spring', the 'pentecostal fire', which while not separated from the movements of time, does provide a way of understanding time in meaningful way. Amidst the coldness of winter, there remains the possibility of warmth and healing. Amidst the fire of destruction, there remains another fire, a pentecostal one, in which the concrete moments of time of gathered together into redemptive possibility ('All shall be well and / All manner of things shall be well'¹). But it is only through enduring time that we can see redemptive possibility; we cannot escape time, or extract ourselves but have to submit ourselves to the frightening flame of Love as we encounter it in the vortex of time.

What all this implies for Williams own view of tragedy and time will be developed further in the next chapter when we look at the trajectory of the *Four Quartets* in Williams' later reflections of the theme. What can be said at this stage is that through an emersion in these texts from early on (influenced also no doubt by the general theological trend of MacKinnon), Williams was fully acquainted with a kind of 'tragic realism' which sought to emphasize the irreducibility of the 'tragic' as we encounter in our personal and collective histories. The point that Eliot drove home for Williams was that we cannot seek to escape time to find meaning to history – it is only in time that the problems of time can be overcome ('Only through time time is conquered').² It is only through enduring time that we can truly see a redemptive vision which is not subject to the world of fantasy and projection. To quote Myers again: 'The possibility of the world's transformation...emerges from endurance, from a truthful and unprotected *seeing* of what is really there.'³ This means that already at this stage, Williams' understanding of tragedy cannot be ultimately defeatist or pessimistic; hope does remain, but the hope that remains is one that has been purged through the fire and 'torment' of divine love. In other words, it is through learning to see the world as it truly is, in all its tragic and painful contours, not escaping into the world of speculation, that we are able to glimpse a hopeful vision – even as it is chastened by the onslaught of doubt. History does not provide easy solutions, and God's presence in the world is not unambiguous or apparent, it remains paradoxical, a presence-in-absence. To quote

¹ *Little Gidding* V, 209.

² *Burnt Norton* II, 180. One should reference here, since it would important for Williams thought as well, the rule of Gregory Nazianzen in relation to classical atonement theology whereby what is *not* assumed is also not healed.

³ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 25.

Eliot himself: ‘the demon of doubt is...inseparable from the spirit of belief.’¹ That is, hope must pass through the funnel of tragedy and doubt if it is not to be just a variation of wishful thinking, or a facile utopianism. Redemption and meaning remain real options in world, since according to the confession of the Christian church, the sheer *thereness* of the incarnation – God’s entry into time – means that meaninglessness does not have the last word. To quote Shakespeare: ‘the worst is not / so long as we can say, ‘This is the worst’.’² To see the world as it desperately *is* is already to see something beyond it.

In relation to the motifs that are important for Williams’ own developing theory of the tragic, we can see that the *Quartet* lectures exemplify his focus on *contingency*, in the sense that the factor of time is taken seriously and is deemed to be central for Williams’ understanding of the tragic. Taking time seriously, being attentive to its contours, makes one realise that tragedy is simply a part of living within time. Suffering, apparent meaninglessness, and even chaos are products of radical contingency. Furthermore, our attention to the particular shape of history, and its tragic consequences, help us to leave ‘the world of speculation’, open us to the ‘objectivity’ of the world. Such a motif coheres with Williams’ practice of *contemplation*, confirming a practice we find throughout Williams’ work, and in relation to his treatment of the tragic in particular in which the tragic is taken in its full ‘objectivity’. And lastly, we have seen that by focusing on tragedy Williams sought to expound an understanding of Christian hope that does not bypass the difficulty of history. Redemption cannot be envisioned through bypassing the world; and it is through the incarnation that we are able to impute meaning to the fluctuations of time. But this does not mean that we have thereby overcome the *difficulty* that tragedy proposes. As we saw when we examined Williams’ essay on ‘The Spirit of the Age to Come’, Christian hope must be understood within the context of tragedy, and such a hope cannot look past the horrors that history proposes – the starkness and the difficulty remain. The question is (as Williams penned in a review around the same time), what ‘eschatology can cope with this [the epiphany of human catastrophe] without diminishing its seriousness?’³ Williams’ is not pessimistic or despairing, but rather seeks to emphasise a tragically realistic vision that does not bypass the problem and question that human suffering continues to propose. Ben Myers confirms this opinion by saying that for Williams ‘Whatever Christian eschatology might mean, it cannot posit any final triumph over human imperfection and limitation. To eliminate tragedy would be to do away with the difference that makes us human.’⁴ He continues elsewhere to say that ‘Christian hope is most pronounced where history is experienced as a spiritual catastrophe. Christian hope does not invalidate the tragic vision, but reaffirms it – just as Christ’s resurrection does not cancel out the crucifixion, but transfigures it and discloses its inner significance.’⁵ Such a vision is tied to Williams’ ‘imaginative asceticism’ whereby ‘eschatological language is legitimate only to the extent that it refuses to posit any theory of the end.’⁶ This perspective can be more briefly summarised in the words of Silouan the Athonite (1866-1938), a Russian Orthodox theologian and mystic: ‘Keep your mind in

¹ T.S. Eliot, ‘Introduction’ [1958] in Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans W.F. Trotter (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2003), xv.

² *King Lear* 4.1.29-30.

³ ‘Christian Art and Cultural Pluralism: Reflections on “L’art de l’icone”, by Paul Evdokimov’, 42.

⁴ *Christ the Stranger*, 56.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

hell – and despair not'.¹ That is, the challenge we are faced with is how we are to conceive of hope and a genuine visionary consciousness within the infernal and sometimes terrifying undulations of history.

In this sense, what Eliot and Williams seem to be proposing is an understanding of redemption that is able to adapt itself to the specific contours of history and time, and the particularities of tragedy. 'What is not assumed is not healed' (Gregory Nazianzen), and so the redemption of time and tragedy needs to give dignity to these realities of human development and temporality, not simply effacing them, or cutting the Gordian knot (eschatologically speaking). How we are to understand the redemption of temporality and tragic suffering, without erasing its quiddity remains a challenge for theology. Consequently, if I am permitted to extrapolate a little, our theology will need to adopt a soteriological perspective which is able to hold onto (if I can coin the term) a *redemption-of* structure (in analogous sense to way Lacan and Badiou speak of an *ethics-of* structure)², within the context of an orthodox, Christo-pneumatological understanding of salvation, one that 'shapes' and 'conforms' itself to the particular events, by making them 'present' through the kenotic, transformative, poetic, and diversifying agency of the Spirit³ (a kind of soteriological *Aufhebung* if you will) in which the resurrection does not cancel out limitation, temporality, or even (necessarily) the wounds of tragedy, but rather gives them the dignity they have, especially in regard to the personal identities of those who have been formed by such realities. Or to use more classically Christian idioms (referencing Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Maximus the Confessor), the human 'soul' (*psychē*) is 'always implicated in contingent matter, and even its final pilgrimage into God depends...upon the deployment and integration of bodiliness and animality'⁴ so that the particular *eidos* or *imago dei* is not cancelled by the resurrection, but rather redeems individuals in all their narrative particularity⁵, including those experiences of pain and tragedy which have in some sense been constitutive of a particular person's narrativized identity.

Nonetheless (it should be admitted), after all of this one could debate with Williams' interpretation of the poems. One could argue that his interpretation of Eliot is tendentious in places, and that he smooths out some of the rough edges. Rupert Shortt – Williams' biographer – says as much in his summary of the lectures.⁶ In relation to the idea of incarnation and historical embodiment, Terry Eagleton says that the *Quartets* are 'performative contradiction' in which the form of the poem is 'at odds with its content', particularly in relation to the underlying theme of Eliot's incarnational theology. Eagleton says that the *Quartets* in their cumulative effect imply two contrasting visions where 'the

¹ Quoted as an epigraph in Gillian Rose, *Love's Work* (Great Britain: Vintage, 1995). For more biographical material on Staretz Silouan, as well as a commentary on this saying, which he apparently received in a divine vision, see Archimandrite Sophrony, *The Monk of Mount Athos: Staretz Silouan 1866-1938*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (London-Oxford: Mowbrays, 1973).

² Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London-New York: Verso, 2001), 27-28.

³ Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Malum: Theologische Hermeneutik des Bösen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 113-117; Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Becoming Present: An Inquiry into the Christian Sense of the Presence of God* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 152-156. By way of analogy, to clarify what I mean, the 'poetic' agency of the Spirit would need to enact a redemption of temporality in a comparable way to the way an artist transforms suffering into painting or poetry. One thinks here of Paul Celan's attempt to write a form of poetry after Auschwitz that sought to conform to the German language to the historical experience of the extermination camps, thereby redeeming the German language, while at the same time taking account of existential rupture that Auschwitz-Birkenau created for language.

⁴ Williams, 'Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion', 244.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁶ Shortt, *Rowan's Rule*, 90.

incarnation makes all the difference and no difference at all'. In Eagleton's opinion, 'the poetry remains resolutely anti-incarnational'.¹

Now obviously such an eminent opinion has implications for Williams own strongly incarnational interpretation of the poems. However, I cannot here engage fully in details seeking to defend Williams own exegesis against those who would interpret the *Quartets* differently, or formulate how Williams himself might respond to such opinions. In relation to Eagleton's interpretation, Williams might say that one cannot focus on the collective vision of the poems together, since there are parts – as we have seen in *Burnt Norton* – where an anti-incarnational perspective does seem to surface. However, Williams would argue that Eliot does not remain there: instead he moves beyond such a perspective to a more incarnational vista in which time and the difficulties it involves are taken up into the ambit of redemption. Instead of summarising the poetic vision of the *Quartets* in a singular manner, Williams would advocate a *dramatic* or *diachronic* reading² whereby the poems are read within the context of movement, development, and change – amidst the differing voices that clamour within. Again, I cannot guarantee such an opinion against further critique, but I believe that Williams has an offered an interpretation of the *Quartets* which deserves to be taken seriously. Our purposes here, however, have been primarily to see how Eliot's vision within the *Quartets* had an impact of Williams own appropriation of tragic theology, as it relates to a resolute historical consciousness.

In this chapter, I have sought to map how a tragic vision made its way into Williams' thought processes. I have shown that the seeds are laid early on for the later flowering of Williams' more mature thought. By examining the thought of MacKinnon, and some of Williams' early texts, we have shown that Williams appropriated a tragic understanding of theology and history from an early stage in his development. At this early stage, tragedy is entwined with questions of time and the movement of history. Tragedy occurs because we live as creatures bounded by time – a possibility which we cannot escape as long as we live as creatures within time. And yet, Williams does not adopt a pessimistic vision but rather a strongly *realist* one in which the ineffaceability of tragedy is taken seriously within the context of a critically-circumscribed understanding of eschatological hope and God's ultimate victory. Such a hope has to proceed through the fires of purgation, through the dark night of the tragedy so that Christian hope may be truly a desire for redemption of *this* world – a world of loss, of the irreparable

In the following chapter, I will develop our genealogical study further by showing how the insights displayed in the *Quartets* lectures are developed further in later years. I shall focus on Williams' understanding of the poetic, in relation to his emphasis on taking the tragic nature of the world seriously. Further, we shall attempt to show how Williams' suspicion of 'fantasy' developed more pertinently in the period following his lectures on the *Quartets*.

¹ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 49.

² In fact, in his essay on 'The Discipline of Scripture' (*On Christian Theology*, 44-59) Williams explicitly uses the *Four Quartets* as an example for such a *diachronic* or *dramatic* text (pp. 45-47), one that if read outside of this movement will be misinterpreted since one moment of the text is extracted from the trajectory of the entire movement.

4. *The World of Speculation*

In this chapter I hope to map out a little more the influence that the *Quartets* had on Williams' later published reflections. I shall focus here on some essays and sermons, some explicitly focusing on this trajectory, and others in which the theme appears only in a tangential way. I aim to show that while Williams' understanding of this theme matures in his later reflections, the starkness of the vision has not dissipated. In fact, in some cases, it has become even more pointed and emphasised, even if the language has changed a little. In our examination, we shall begin with those texts written shortly after or around the same time that he delivered his lectures on the *Quartets*, and work our way up to those texts that are more recent. Some significant texts¹ have been left out of this genealogy and have rather been postponed to the following chapter since while they are connected to the discussed theme, they are part of a slightly distinct trajectory which should be teased out separately. Remembering our themes of *contingency, compassion, contemplation, and non-closure*, we will focus our attention particularly on the themes of contemplation and compassion. In the first essay we will examine we will see that Williams' emphasis on contemplation is related to the process of artistic and creative endeavour. The practice of contemplation is linked to a poetic, artistic sensibility and imagination, which is linked to the experience of tragedy. The artist, through opening himself or herself to reality as it presents itself, is able to enact a *protest* against the world as it stands by seeking to find an *alternative* possible world within the reality that confronts us.

Furthermore, we will see that the theme of fantasy also comes to the fore in way that is more accentuated than we find in the *Four Quartets* lectures. Williams' largely negative stance in relation to fantasy² is related to his understanding of Christian spirituality. For him, fantasy is largely entwined with the ego's attempt to construct a world of self-protection and self-placating in which God becomes just one more palliative used in the ego's attempt to mollify itself. Williams' more accentuated emphasis on this theme here, while being grounded on his Augustinian sensibilities towards truthful self-confession, is to be explained by his deeper engagement with Freud during the late 1970's and early 1980's. It is within this context that the experience of contemplation and the experience of the 'dark night' enter as a kind of antidote to the projection theory of religion which was articulated so forcefully by Freud and others.

¹ I am referring here to 'Trinity and Ontology', Williams' most sustained engagement with the work of Donald MacKinnon, a text which was published originally in the *Festschrift* for MacKinnon (*Christ, Ethics and Tragedy*, edited by Kenneth Surin), but now collected in *On Christian Theology*. I have chosen to devote a chapter, along with his reflections on theodicy to another separate section.

² It should be clear here that Williams' is not opposed to 'fantasy' in its more neutral sense, since 'fantasy' and 'imagination', for example, often interplay with one another. Williams' suspicion of 'fantasy', when he is referring to it negatively, implies a retreat from the world, or when it is used to pacify the ego in its self-referentiality against the resistant otherness of reality as it presents itself. His critique of 'fantasy' would fall generally under his suspicion of cheap consolation, and no doubt has echoes of Iris Murdoch (amidst others) within it. I want to thank Robert Vosloo making me aware of the possible misunderstanding regarding this distinction.

4.1. 'Poetic and Religious Imagination' (1977)

In an early sermon that Williams delivered about a year after the *Four Quartets* lectures, the influence of the Eliot's vision can still be seen when he says that God will not wipe the tears from our eyes until 'we have learned to weep'.¹ As we have seen in the general thrust of the lectures (as expounded in the previous chapter), Williams is concerned here to articulate an understanding of redemption and healing that does not bypass the reality of suffering, pain, and the existence of the tragedy within time. The emphasis on experiencing healing only through engaging with the reality of the world's tragic contingency is still present here. In the same year, Williams published an essay on Christology in which some of the language found in the *Quartets* lectures resurfaces, particularly in relation to God's passion within time ('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'.)² However, the most sustained published work from this period that engages explicitly in the themes contained in the *Four Quartets* lectures is to be found in an article he wrote on the topic of poetic and religious imagination.³ We shall engage with this text in more detail.

Williams writes that 'Poetry it seems is not grounded in some celebratory sense of being at home in the world, but rather in the acute awareness of the world not being at home in itself, in a sense of *dislocation*.'⁴ The background literary context for this statement, and the essay as a whole, is the biblical narrative of Job. In this context, Williams argues that Job turns away from 'the neat, facile explanations, solutions and evaluations which his comforters import into his disordered experience.' Rather, as the end of the book shows (cf. Job 37-42), 'The brutal and overwhelming monologue which [YHWH] addresses to Job and his friends is essentially a long statement of the utter alienness and inaccessibility of the order of the world to the mind of man, the impossibility of an ordered linguistic picture of it.'⁵ Williams' argument in this essay is that artistic endeavour and poetic representation of the world are not mere resignation or a mere acceptance of the way the world is, but rather – with Job – a refusal to accept 'the world as it is'.⁶ Job refusal to accept the world as it is forms a *protest* against the disorderedness of reality since Job understands experience as 'a question which can only be answered with more questions. His world is not a complete structure to which there can be only a passive response, nor is it a problem to which he, his consciousness, is the solution. It is a disordered flux within which he has to find a place; but this finding of a place (a possible definition of personal maturity) is also to adopt a 'position', in every sense: to make an *option* about reality, to be committed to a 'direction'... of and in the world.'⁷

¹ Williams, 'To Give and Not to Count the Cost: A Sermon Preached at Mirfield in February 1976'. *Sobernost: The Journal of the Fellowship and St. Alban and St. Sergius* 7.5 (1977), 403.

² Williams, 'Person' and 'Personality' in Christology', *Downside Review* 94 (1976), 259. The language to be found in his lecture on *The Dry Salvages* is the closest parallel to the language used here.

³ Williams, 'Poetic and Religious Imagination'. *Theology* 80 (1977), 178-187.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.* 179.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Following Jacques Maritain, Williams seeks to advance an understanding of poetic enterprise which desires to construct 'a world more real than the reality offered to the senses'.¹ In the artistic process of creation and representation, Williams says that 'the poet *adds* to the world (as does every artist), to the totality of language; thereby proclaiming his dissatisfaction with the existing world and existing linguistic options. The reality before him [sic] is obscurely incomplete: it proposes to the poet the task of making it *significant* - which does not mean imposing upon it an alien structure of explanation. Significance is a function of communication, and as such is social and political: it is a setting of something in a new context, a creation of new possibilities of understanding and appropriating the world in human language.'²

Moving on, he says that before poetry is able to do the work of re-creation there must be 'an entirely committed immersion in the world, a watching and listening in silence'. However, 'the deeper this immersion becomes, the less is it possible to translate the world into new words, new images.' This is because 'the world moves towards its future, but this is not at my disposal.'³ Here again the theme of redemption returns particularly regarding the ability to make sense and meaning of the world (a theme we have encountered in the *Quartets* lectures). The language of ecstasy, a retreat simply into the present moment apart from the flux of time, does not give us a sense of the wholeness necessary for a redemption of time itself. An attempt to make sense of reality involves the risk of returning to language, in the hope that the labour of meaning-making and significance – as occurs within the realm of public discourse and negotiation – will bear some kind of fruit, some 'grace': 'The return to language requires an act of faith; and an acceptance of the probability of failure. It is, as such, an exercise in radical humility and an expression of the hope of 'grace', communication surviving the perils of words.'⁴ While commenting on *Little Gidding* a little later in the essay, we again come across this idea of a redemptive vision that is only grasped through the process of death, fragility, and irony⁵: 'Every word is a step towards death, yet the exploration must continue: death is the cost of honesty, of seeing clearly'. And it is only by taking this risk, this return to language and to the difficulties of the present, that we can see such a movement is 'not simply a pointless and disastrous martyrdom, but is itself obscurely redemptive.'⁶ As such 'Utter, unqualified silence is not a final option for the poet, because it is a retreat into pure subjective 'experience'. The poet, if he [sic] is at all serious, is already committed to the world, he has made moral options in his initial movement of

¹ Ibid. It is interesting to note that Williams more mature reflections on art simply expound this initial insight further. The theme of patience, attention and time-taking in order to allow what is there to show itself remains an important insight in relation to Williams understanding of art, as we have already discussed in chapter two. For more on this, cf. Williams, 'Art: Taking Time and Making Sense', 25-27. Cf. here also Paul Ricoeur's comment on the poetic, one that would be influential on Williams' later reflections on the topic of revelation: '...poetic language alone restores to us that participation-in or belonging-to an order of things which precedes our capacity to oppose ourselves to things taken as objects opposed to a subject. Hence the function of poetic discourse is to bring about this emergence of a depth-structure of belonging-to amid the ruins of descriptive discourse', in Ricoeur, 'Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation'. *The Harvard Theological Review*, 70.1-2 (1977), 24.

² 'Poetic and Religious Imagination', 179-180.

³ Ibid. 181. Williams makes comparisons here with Simone Weil's concept of 'necessity'. It is here that he also quotes a segment of *Burnt Norton III* (*Collected Poems*, 181): 'The world moves / In appetency, on its metalled ways / Of time past and time future.'

⁴ Ibid. 182.

⁵ Williams is drawing here a parallel here between the experience of death, risk, and the self-ironizing of the poet. Here is a fuller quotation to give some context (Ibid., 184): 'If irony is total absence, the poet can never be entirely an ironist: he has at last to confess what his whole utterance has pointed towards, his *own* incompleteness, exigency and poverty. To others, he may offer new possibilities, a renewal of speech, a kind of transfiguration or resurrection of language; but he, no less than other men [sic], is in need of mercy. His [sic] irony is a measure of his impotence to save himself: his words remain *his* words, he cannot avoid self-assertion, of however refined a kind'.

⁶ Ibid. 184.

protest, and so has bound himself to the task of changing the world, giving it 'direction'... His calling is to *compassion*.' He rhapsodizes further by saying that 'To 'consent to' the world is to recognize it as abandoned by God, devoid of the unambiguous signs of God's presence and activity, marked by the signs of absence; and this 'consent' is the source of compassion for the whole creation. It is this compassion, and nothing else which makes God *present* in the world, uniting creatures to God. To feel and show compassion to a creature is to accept it unconditionally, and this unconditional acceptance is precisely the action of God.'¹

The language of divine absence and compassion here some of the themes we encountered earlier in our discussion of the *Quartets* lectures. What Williams seems to be saying here is that poet, by adopting a position of irony in relation to his or her words, does not adopt complete speechlessness because such a speechlessness would be out-of-sync with the poetic drive to protest against divine absence, and the seeming meaninglessness of the world. To return to language, to admit to the frailty and weakness that is inherent in our interactions with the world, opens us to the experience of compassion, which is a form of God's action in the world, an opening of divine glory hidden within the experience of dereliction. The compassionate person, acknowledging the world as it is directs 'the world towards reconciliation, brings the 'glory of God' into the world, even as he [sic] protests at its outrage. His protest witnesses to a 'possible future', the knowledge that things might be otherwise, a new world: in this sense, God is the future...the possibility of reconciliation. And the protest of compassion is his effective presence in the world, and so, in itself, a step towards the realization of that possibility.'² For the poet (who may or not believe in God), the creative process involves an awareness of hope and the promise grace pointing towards the world's 'alternate possibilities', to a grace that cannot 'absolve us from that fanatical attention to *particulars*, to what the world is, to the linguistic past, without which our notions of 'experience' and 'reality' will be cheap and trivial. And the stirring of pity...cannot absolve us from the looking towards a future in which the trap of the past, the history of disaster and of failure...can be transcended; without this, there can only be cynicism, fatalism, or despair.' Speaking of the poetic figure again: 'On both these counts the poet is a humanist and a radical; that is to say, he is concerned with man and his future, or his redemption. He is also a converted man, one whose knowledge has changed him. He is the beginning of a new world, in his

¹ Ibid. For more on the relation between tragic theology and an ethic of compassion, see Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

² 'Poetic and Religious Imagination', 185. As a side comment, it should be said that Williams would argue (following classical Christian thought) that we participate in God's being-in-act of love and compassion, not God's essence, since that would undermine the trinity of God. This seems to be Williams' appropriation of the doctrine of *theosis* to be found in Eastern Orthodoxy. He is critical of certain trends within Orthodoxy (Lossky included) which seem to uncritically appropriate the thought of Gregory Palamite. For more on this, Williams, 'The Philosophical Structures of Palamism'. *Eastern Churches Review* 9.1-2 (1977), 27-44. Williams is uncomfortable with the whole *ousia* and *energeia* structure associated with Palamite theology. He seems to opt rather for the *actus essendi* of Aquinas: we as creatures participate 'intentionally' by grace in the Trinitarian being-in-act of God, rather than in God's essence itself. To participate in God's essence would be to deny the trinity, but to distinguish the being of God into *ousia* and *energeia* (as Palamas does), making participation apply to the latter rather than the former, implies (within the philosophical tradition that Palamism inherits), that creation is necessary rather than contingent. Here, Williams prefers the solution of Aquinas; he is fond of quoting Eliot's line from *The Dry Salvages*, 'You are the music while the music lasts' in this regard. For more reflections on this musical analogy, in relation to Williams understanding of our participation in the trinity, see Williams, 'The Deflections of Desire', 129-30. For more on the theme of *theosis* and deification, see Williams, 'Deification', in Gordon Wakefield (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM 1983), 106-108. It could also be mentioned here, in relation to the *Filioque* debate, that Williams (referencing the work of Paul Evdokimov), once suggested that he thought that the model of the Son proceeding *ex Patre Spirituque*, in a comparable manner to the *ex Patre Filioque*, might be a more helpful model than the essence-energies distinction (though he did also go onto suggest that such suggestions, echoing Barth, might be 'Godless speculations'). For this comment, see Williams, 'Review of Paul Evdokimov, L'Esprit Saint dans la Tradition Orthodoxe, Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1969. *Sobornost: The Journal of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius* 6.4 (1972), 284-5. As far as I am aware, this was Williams' first published contribution to a theological journal.

remaking, his reappropriation of his speech and his history. He is himself, for his hearers or readers, a sign of hope, however confused or desperate his biography may be. He has come back alive, though not unscathed, from the borders of language to confirm our suspicions that the world is not to be *merely* accepted, but accepted and transformed; to teach us how to praise the elusive possibility of God, the future we can never quite succeed in naming.¹

Returning to the theme of dislocation, encountered at the beginning of the essay, Williams turns to another Old Testament figure – namely Jacob, and his encounter of wrestling with an ‘adversary’. He writes, firstly speaking more christologically, that ‘the Christian the name of God is Christ crucified, the ultimate symbol of dislocation’. Referencing the story in an almost midrashic manner, he says that for ‘the poet the marks of *his* discontent and dislocation must be the ‘name of God’ the impulse which refuses to allow him to retreat from the exposed frontier, the deserted riverbank in the dark, but pushes him always back to his adversary and questioner, savage [YHWH] assaulting him out of the whirlwind. The poet praises, but he does not simply and unequivocally affirm and celebrate; if nothing else, he can praise the strength and resilience of his adversary, and of the world which he sees reflected in the adversary’s eyes.’²

To summarize what we have seen in this essay, we could say that while the focus of this essay is slightly different to what we encountered in the *Quartets* lectures (the emphasis being here on the poetic process and the risk of language, rather than the vicissitudes and contingency of time). However, the vision encountered here is fundamentally the same. The poet discovers him or herself in a place of dislocation, in a place of tragic disorder and particularity. In this context, the temptation could be to remain silent and simply accept this reality *tout court*. But according to Williams, the poet should not rest content with the status quo, simply accepting the world as it stands. Rather, the poet testifies to an alternative reality, a hope beyond the failure of words in order to express this reality. The poetic work is a *protest* against the world as it stands. It is an attempt to arrest meaning from the apparent chaos and meaningless of what stands before us in the present. As such, it’s a profoundly *ethical* and *hopeful* disposition – even as it takes seriously the sheer actuality of tragedy. Ben Myers, in his book on Williams, summarises the content of this essay by saying that ‘The poet ventures to speak not because speech is adequate but because it is a necessary moment in the continuing struggle for meaning. You stake a position not because it is right, but because staking a position is the only way to enter into process of learning and growth.’³ As we have seen in Williams other essays, and in the *Quartet* lectures, hope and protest remain possible, even paradoxically, despite a tragic perspective. The *theologia crucis* is at the same time a *theologia gloria*

¹ Ibid. 185-186.

² Ibid. 186. It should be noted here that the identity of the adversary in Gen. 32.25-50 remains thoroughly ambiguous (an angel, God, a human being). One could argue here for a kind of ‘symbolic displacement’ along the lines that Roland Barthes suggests, whereby Jacob’s struggle with ‘God’ is a displacement for his lifelong struggle with Esau, as entwined with his desire to receive blessing over against Esau (cf. Gen. 27). For more on this Roland Barthes, ‘The Struggle with the Angel: Textual Analysis of Genesis 32: 22-33’, in Roland Barthes et al, *Structural Analysis and Biblical Exegesis: Interpretational Essays*, trans. Alfred M. Johnson (Pittsburg: The Pickwick Press, 1974), 21-33.

³ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 26. It should be stated here that Myers seems to be, in my opinion, interpreting Williams in light of Williams’ later engagement (from the later 1980’s onward) with the thought of Gillian Rose, particularly as it is found in her book *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). Myers is not engaged in a genealogical study, like I am trying to do here, but is rather attempting a coherent understanding of Williams as it relates to his entire theological development. In this sense, his interpretation is correct. However, I am not quite sure that some of the accents he places in his interpretation of this essay are visibly present in Williams by this stage (1977), although definitely the seeds are sown for later development.

(in the Johannine sense of this equation).¹ Hope is a possibility within the tragic disorderedness of time so that an emphasis on the risk, loss and contingency that time involves does not imply despair or fatalism (as some interpretations of tragedy imply). Instead, we could say already at this stage in Williams' thought a theology of *tragic hope* is already in place.

The 1970's do not provide us with any other major reflections on this theme, but we do have hints of what is to come later, particularly in relation to tragic limitation. In *The Wound of Knowledge* (1979), referencing Ignatius, he says early Christianity, unlike other cults, was concerned with 'historical reality' and remarks further that it 'pointed to a human life characterized by severe conflict and tragedy as a revelation, not of the hopelessness of the human condition, but of the hope to be uncovered *in* tragedy and the character of a God who elects for himself the experience of the tragic and destructive suffering as a means of self-gift.'² Speaking of Augustine, Williams makes reference to 'the tragic, the senseless, the irremediable in human pain', as well as making a statement that 'the compulsion towards the love of God's beauty comes not only from the loveliness but also from the horror of the world. The love of God looks in hope for joy already begun, but also looks for the healing of the world's wounds; like all authentic hope, it is in some degree *protest*.'³ Another relevant passage comes at the end of the book. Here, some of language to be found in Williams' *Quartets* lectures (particularly his lecture on *Little Gidding*) is apparent:

'Christianity begins in contradictions, in the painful effort to live with the baffling plurality and diversity of God's manifested life – law and gospel, judgement and grace, the crucified son crying to the Father. Christian experience does not simply move from one level to the next and stay there, but is drawn again and again to the central and fruitful darkness of the cross. But in this constant movement outwards in affirmation and inwards towards emptiness, there *is* life and growth... *In the middle of the fire we are healed and restored – though never taken out of it* [italics mine]. As Augustine wrote, it is at night that his voice is heard. To want to escape the 'night' and the costly struggles with doubt and vacuity is to seek another God from the one who speaks in and as Jesus crucified. *Crux probat omnia*. There is no other touchstone.'⁴

There are some other minor references, namely in some early reflections on nation and statehood⁵, as well as his discussion of the metaphor of Eucharistic sacrifice⁶, which touch similar themes during

¹ One could argue that the basis for this it be found in his Christology in which the divine presence exists within the world precisely as a presence-in-absence which the *theologia crucis* is also a *theologia gloria*. Cf. 'The Spirit of the Age to Come', 619; 'Person and Personality', 259; *FQ III*, 9.

² *The Wound of Knowledge*, 22

³ *Ibid.*, 80-81. I have compared the revised edition to the original 1979 edition, and this passage quoted remains completely unchanged. Throughout this thesis, I will refer to the later 1990 edition rather than the original 1979 edition.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁵ 'Life in the *polis* is life in the world from which God has withdrawn for the sake of its liberty. It is thus life charged with ambiguity, vulnerable to the tragic. There are no final solutions – the very words have appalling connotations. History and the *polis* are where God is condemned to death'. For this quotation, see Williams, 'Mankind, Nation, State', in Paul Bellard and Huw Jones (eds.), *This Land and This People* (Cardiff: Collegiate Centre of Theology, University College, 1979), 124.

⁶ For example, in Williams' study of the use of 'sacrifice' in Eucharistic imagery, one can find the following statements: '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 – in the presence in our world of an unreserved compassion and an unrestricted hope – he establishes communion; but this can only be clearly shown only in conditions of final rejection and dereliction. The gift is

this period, but enough has been said to trace the continuity of the ideas embodied in the earlier lectures.

4.2. Eliot, Freud, and the Self: The 1980's

In relation to what we have been discussing, the most significant text available which shows us how the poetic and theological vision of the *Quartets* is still active in Williams' thought well into the 1980's is a sermon he delivered, entitled 'Lazarus: In Memory of T.S. Eliot'.¹ The year that this was delivered is 1984², nearly ten years after he delivered the *Quartets* lectures. Williams begins the sermon by grappling with the common criticism that 'Eliot is a Manichee, a despiser of the world and its joys'. Eliot's stark vision of the early twentieth century seems to be pretty grim and bleak from a certain perspective. So the question is posed is: 'Is he incapable of love?' Is Eliot able to grasp a fuller world and vision which points beyond the barrenness that he sees? Williams poses the question – asked by those who knew Eliot – does Eliot's conversion to Christianity 'merely set the final seal on his devaluing of humanity'? Was 'the pose of the helpless observer...now fixed for ever by the myths of sin and redemption'? Williams comments that people will continue saying things like this about Eliot, and that it is easy enough to do so. However, what is less easy to do is 'to enter into the sensibility of a man for whom the consciousness of being human was so constantly and nakedly the consciousness of pain and failure, loss of simplicity and single-mindedness...It is easy to complain of Eliot's negativity or "pessimism," because most of us do not have the honesty to risk seeing the world in that way - the vision of a heart of darkness, of people devouring and being devoured, where we are all old, weighed down with terrible knowledge and guilt.'³

In Williams' estimation, Eliot was a man who was 'exceptionally alive to the possibilities of illusion and self-deception in human lives' and that he 'risked exposure to a terrible and unanswerable truth'. And it is precisely 'the crucifying demand of this incarnate truth' that led Eliot to wrestle with this problem in the *Quartets*. Here, Williams repeats what we have recorded earlier – in relation to the unpublished lectures – that the sequence of poems is 'constantly turning back on itself, replying to itself, qualifying, correcting' and that sequence has commonly been read 'as if it added nothing to Eliot's earlier poems, as if it simply repeated his weariness and longing for reposeful death'. Williams argues that the sequence rather is concerned with the question of the redemption of time. In relation *Burnt Norton*, Williams repeats his earlier judgement (in light of Eliot's later treatment of the theme in *East Coker* and *The Dry Salvages*) that 'the timeless moment' – as expounded in *Burnt Norton* - 'cannot cope with, cannot heal, the pain of mortality, the anguish and despair of human beings living in a senseless world that seems no more than a vortex of destruction.'

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 ('Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession, of belonging to another, to others, or to God', wrote Eliot in *East Coker*), 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.' For these quotations, see Williams, *Eucharistic Sacrifice: The Roots of a Metaphor*. Grove Liturgical Study 31 (Bramcote, Notts: Grove, 1982), 28-29.

¹ *A Ray of Darkness*, 186-191.

² The year of delivery for this sermon is recorded by Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 25.

³ *A Ray of Darkness*, 187-188.

The question that remains then is: where then is healing to be found? Williams summarises Eliot's stark vision once again: 'there is no escape, except into fantasy. There is only a penetrating further into the blackness and destructiveness of the world. Face the truth; face the fact that the world is a world of meaninglessness, of destruction, violence, death and loss, that no light of ecstasy can change this. Only when we stop projecting patterns on to the world can we live without illusion, and living without illusion is the first step to salvation.'¹ Williams goes onto say that the 'starkness' of Eliot's vision gives way to the gospel because

'...if there is a God whose will is for the healing of men and women, he can heal only by acting in the worldliness of the world, in and through the vortex of death and loss. He must share the condition of our sickness, our damnation, so as to bring his life and fullness into it...God has borne all that we bear and so has made the fabric of history his own garment. The world has no discernible meaning or pattern, but into it there has entered the compassion of God. Give up the futile struggle to dominate and organize the chaos of the world in systems and mythologies, and realize that the empty destitution of confronting darkness is the only way in which *love* can begin. Only if we are honest about the world can we see the choices that confront us. Either there is only destruction and death, or there is destruction and death which we take into ourselves to let it burn away our self-obsession and so make room for active love, compassion, mutual giving, life in communion. And the only sign of this possibility is the ambivalent memory of a dead and betrayed man.'²

The emphasis here on rejecting fantasy for the sake of seeing clearly is what we have encountered before in his lectures on the *Quartets*. In Williams' opinion, following after Eliot, it is only by not evading fantasy, by seeing the 'progress' of history as it really happens – with all its tragic entanglements – that we are opened to genuine compassion, as we have already seen in a slightly different way regarding his reflections on the poet in the previous section of this chapter. And it is through the process of 'making out of chaos a network of compassion and of giving to others' that 'there is redemption and reconciliation in the world of history.' He goes on to say that 'The pain will not go away; the horror will remain' and yet it is shot through with 'the hope and the possibility of compassion and reconciliation.' Hope and meaning remain in this milieu of terror, but it comes – as one might put it (Williams does not say this) – as a phoenix from the ashes. Williams postulates further and says that 'Eliot was a great preacher of the gospel because he had the integrity not to close his eyes to any of the real horror of the world; preaching is cheap if it fails to meet human beings at their darkest points. The reconciliation he writes of is utterly costly, mortally hard: our sole nourishment in the task is the blood of God's costly love, the assurance that even death, loss, disorder are not stronger than the compassion of God.'³ At the end, he closes off his sermon by referring to a line from *Little Gidding* ('We only live, only suspire / Consumed by either fire or fire'), and

¹ Ibid. 189.

² Ibid. 189-190.

³ Ibid. 190-191.

comments by saying that ‘No optimism, no activism will do that does not grow out of the vision of these two fires, the unbearable violence and the unbearable compassion.’¹

In summary of this sermon, we can see that Williams’ fundamental vision of the tragic disorderedness of life has not changed significantly. The relation between the historical and visionary consciousness are evident once again: it is only by taking time, acknowledging history, and by risking the apparent nihilism it implies seriously that we can glimpse a redemptive vision, inspired by the belief in a God who has revealed Godself in the tragic history of a crucified and risen human being. Quoting Ben Myers again: ‘The possibility of the world’s transformation emerges from a truthful and unprotected *seeing* of what is really there.’² Additionally, we have seen that the theme of fantasy has come to the foreground in an explicit way. The seeds for Williams’ suspicion of fantasy were laid already in the *Quartet* lectures, but there is a clear marked quality to this theme, as found in this sermon, that bears further explication.³

Firstly, Williams’ suspicion of fantasy is inseparable from belief regarding truthful knowledge about God and the self, and how they are inextricably bound together. Such an emphasis would be fundamentally influenced by Williams’ reading of Augustine.⁴ It is difficult to deny the fact that Augustine’s reflections on self-knowledge and human desire have profoundly influenced Williams thought as a whole.⁵ Following Augustine, Williams would argue that human desire cannot find its terminus in any finite object; this is because, in reality, desire always transcends finite objects towards something else. Williams argues that for Augustine God is the only thing that can be enjoyed for itself, for its own sake; all other creaturely objects of desire are ‘signs’ indicating something deeper and divine to the reality we inhabit. However, this does not imply that finite objects are simply passed over and treated as expeditious to some higher purpose, but rather that no earthly object can exhaust our desire, and therefore it cannot be treated as the end of our human and creaturely longing.⁶ Such a perspective counter-acts an ego-centred portrayal of the self because the desire for complete

¹ *Ibid.* 191.

² Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 25.

³ I am indebted, in the following section, to Myers discussion of this theme in *Christ the Stranger*, 107-112. It should also be mentioned here that Williams’ larger suspicion of fantasy is tied to strong affirmation of *dispossession*, both in a personal sense, but also in relation to the larger collective of the church. For some reflections on Williams thinking regarding ‘dispossession’, you can read his ‘Theological Integrity’, in *On Christian Theology*, 3-15. Regarding the church, you can see Rowan Williams, *Mission and Christology*. J.C. Jones Memorial Lecture (Brynmarw: Church Missionary Society, Welsh Members Council, 1994).

⁴ Williams’ interpretation of Augustine can be classed, generally speaking, under the category of recent postmodern attempts to rehabilitate Augustine’s understanding of the human soul in which the self-consciousness of the human is understood as something that is constituted by relation and difference, rather than self-constituted in the Cartesian sense. For a brief summary of some ‘postmodern’ theological interpreters of Augustine view of the human soul (with Rowan Williams included), see Roland Kany, *Augustins Trinitätsdenken: Bilanz, Kritik and Weiterführung der Modernen Forschung*. Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 22 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 240-246. For some substantial arguments that strongly question Augustine as a precursor to the Cartesian *ego*, see Jean-Luc Marion, *In the Self’s Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 56-100.

⁵ For more reflections on this, see *The Wound of Knowledge*, 71-91.

⁶ For the most detailed treatment of this theme, see Williams, ‘Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s *De Doctrina*’. *Journal of Literature & Theology* 3.2 (1989), 138-150. Williams is reflecting here on Augustine’s use of *signum* (sign) and *res* (the thing itself), as well Augustine’s distinction between *frui* (enjoyment) and *uti* (use). Williams seems to be influenced here (in some degree) by his reading of Derrida. For more on this, see Jeffrey McCurry, ‘Towards a Poetics of Theological Creativity: Rowan Williams Reads Augustine *De Doctrina Christiana* after Derrida’. *Modern Theology* 23.3 (2007), 415-433. For a feminist reading of Augustine’s reflections on desire along similar lines, see Karmen MacKendrick, *Divine Enticement: Theological Seductions* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 1-31.

possession of the Other and the self (and the Other-in-the-self¹) are infinitely deferred towards the Triune God, who is a perpetual and infinite movement towards otherness and desire.²

Such a fundamental theological vision informs Augustine's understanding of self-knowledge, which for him is 'a practice of criticism, specifically the way the subject distorts its self-perception into fixity by fixation upon the meeting of needs in the determinate form in which they are mediated to us in the perception of the Other'.³ Augustine does not understand the self as some stable Cartesian entity, but rather articulates the belief in 'the impossibility of stating any theory of the self as a determinate object' because Augustine rejects 'the idea that we could observe the self or mind in a neutral way: because what we see when we look at ourselves is desire', and that 'we are to know and love ourselves as questing, as seeking to love with something of God's freedom (in the sense of a love not glued to any object of satisfaction)'.⁴ Rather than endorsing a proto-Cartesian view of the self, Williams writes that Augustine sought 'to demythologise' the solitary ego by establishing the life of the mind firmly in relation to God', a God understood as 'self-gift, as movement to otherness and distance in self-imparting love'.⁵

All of this is being said to provide some theological background for why Williams' is suspicious of the ego's attempt to grasp stability and security in its interactions with the world. The move towards possession and invulnerability is entwined with the ego's attempt to move *beyond desire* towards completion. The problem with this is that the ego continues to fixate on a series of objects, hoping that

¹ Regarding the themes of desire, possession, and the Other-in-the-self, as well as a much larger discussion surrounding the theme of self as it is formed in negotiation and narrative, see Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (London – New York: T & T Clark, 2000), 171-214. For further reflections on the self as formed within language, negotiation, and construction, see Williams, 'The Suspicion of Suspicion', in *Wrestling with Angels*, 186-201; Williams, 'Interiority and Epiphany: A Reading in New Testament Ethics', in *On Christian Theology*, 239-264.

² On this, see Williams, 'The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure' in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 115-135; Williams, 'Balthasar and Difference', in *Wrestling with Angels*, 77-85. Also, cf. 'Macrina's Deathbed Revisited', 242: 'The conviction of our dependence on an unchangeably loving God draws us into a state of strictly objectless attention, love without projection or condition, moving and expanding but not restless, and kind of *erōs*, yet only capable of being called 'desire' in a rather eccentric sense, because of its distance of wanting and getting, lack and satisfaction. We are challenged to imagine a radical lack, accepted without anxiety, hunger, fantasy.'

³ Williams, "'Know Thyself': What Kind of an Injunction?' in Michael McGhee (ed.) *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.223-224. Williams' language of 'the Other' here is inflected by Lacanian terminology. For Lacan, 'the Other' belongs to the inter-subjective realm of the Symbolic which is the realm of discourse and language into which we are socialized as speaking subjects: 'Man speaks...but it is because the symbol has made him man' (p. 72), quoted in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London & New York: Routledge, 1977). For a brief discussion of Lacan's concept of the Symbolic Order, see Terry Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics* (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 83-90.

⁴ Williams, 'The Paradoxes of Self-knowledge in *De Trinitate*', in Joseph T. Lienhard, Earl C. Muller and Roland J. Teske (eds.) *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*, Collectanea Augustiniana (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 131.

⁵ Williams, 'Sapientia and the Trinity: Reflections on *De Trinitate*', in Bernard Bruning, Mathijs Lamberigts and J van Houtem (eds.) *Collectanea Augustiniana: Mélanges T J van Bavel*, vol. 1 (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1990), 331. It could also be mentioned here that Williams' view of the self and personhood is not only influenced by Augustine, but also his engagement with Eastern Orthodoxy. This can be seen in the first published article that he wrote, which sought to expound the theme of humanity as persons –in-communion. On this cf. Williams, 'The Theology of Personhood: A Study of the Thought of Christos Yannaras', *Soberness: The Journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius* 6.6 (1972), 415-430. However, the main influence on Williams' thought from within Orthodoxy is still Vladimir Lossky, particularly in relation to his distinction between the 'person' and the 'individual'. For Lossky (like Augustine), the mystery of personhood was grounded upon the mystery of the Trinity, that the *imago dei* reflects the *imago trinitatis*. For Lossky, in the Trinity there is no 'individual will' but rather a movement of kenosis whereby the persons renounce themselves for the sake of the Other: 'the person expresses itself most truly in that it renounces to exist for itself' (p. 144), in Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976). That such a view of personhood is still influential on Williams today, can be seen in an interview Williams conducted in the mid-90's with Todd Breyfogle. Here, summing up Lossky's own view of personhood, Williams says that for Lossky 'talking about the person is as difficult as talking about God. If you want to talk about human beings in the image of God, it may be in that difficulty and elusiveness that the centrally human is to be located, not in any quality that we and God have in common... I found that — and still find it — extremely interesting.' He goes on to say that when we are, 'talking about the human, we occupy the same edge of difficulty that we occupy when talking about God. And we face the same danger of falling over into rather banal generalities... I think Lossky pushes beyond that to say that the personal in us is not an item among others: it is the strangeness and difficulty, the irreducibility, within any relation.(pp. 307-308)', in Todd Breyfogle, 'Time and Transformation'.

such a completion will be accomplished. In the process however, various finite objects are used (and abused) to establish the ego's security in the world. It is such a desire for security that is at its base a fantasy, a goal which will never be accomplished. Our desire for invulnerability and a frictionless environment, beyond the milieu of perpetual desire, can be projected also onto God, who is believed to be the Archimedean point upon which we shall establish the ultimate stability and completion.¹ And it is here the figure of Freud appears.

Our original question above was why the theme of fantasy occurs in a more pointed way in the sermon discussed than in comparison to what we find in his earlier texts. The answer seems to lie in Williams' engagement with Freud, which became deeper sometime in the late 1970's and the early 1980's. It is difficult to ascertain exactly where Freud's influence enters most pointedly. We can see it surface towards the end of Williams' essay on Barth and Trinity (1979), where he talks about robust Christian theology of the Trinity avoiding 'the Freudian charge that Christianity is an inflation of infantile beliefs about the omnipotent father who can solve all problems and heal all wounds'.² However, the most in-depth treatment this theme is to be found in an encyclopaedia article published in 1983, a year before he preached the sermon discussed above.³ It can be seen in this article that Williams is generally quite critical of Freud's approach towards the origins of religious belief. Freud adopts a 'scientific' approach towards the origins of religion, which in reality is not 'scientific' but rather a 'mythical' construct. He compares Freud's approach to other modern approaches to psychoanalysis, in order to show how the field has changed and become more focused on self-narration, storytelling, and existential analysis. Yet Williams does give Freud credit regarding his critique of religion. He writes that 'Religion attempts to deal with the powerlessness of the human subject; but rather than itself being a means of empowerment, its projects unrestricted power onto an alien reality and fixes the self in a permanent state of impotence and alienation. Power (divine power) is accessible only through self-abasement and self-devaluing'.⁴

Williams also seems to side with Freud (against figures like Erich Fromm) in relation to his tragic interpretation of human life. Against a kind of mysticism which would argue for a cosmic reconciliation between humanity and nature – another 'alienating myth' in Williams' opinion – we have to wrestle with the problem of 'contradiction, limit and mortality'. In his words, 'there is no way that limitless power ever becomes available to humanity'. The attempt of self-deification is a futile attempt of humanity to extricate itself from the limitations of created existence. Within such a context, belief in a creating God does not necessarily imply 'alienation and self-loss', because as Williams says '[a] God who is both radically other and radically hidden is not a competitor for power with the finite self: to depend for one's identity ultimately upon a hidden source of self-giving or self-sharing is to be free as one can be within the tragic limits of the world'.⁵ Williams (not doubt following Aquinas¹ and Nicholas

¹ Cf. Williams, 'Adult Geometry: Dangerous Thoughts in R.S. Thomas', 86-89

² Williams, 'Barth on the Triune God' [1979], in *Wrestling with Angels*, 141.

³ Williams, 'Freudian Psychology', in Alan Richardson and John Bowden (eds.), *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1983), 219-222.

⁴ Ibid. 220. For some reflections on Freudianism, within a more devotional context, focusing on how believers construct divine 'omnipotence' and 'love' in ways that are at odds with a more orthodox picture of God, see Brother Emmanuel of Taizé, *Love, Imperfectly Known: Beyond Spontaneous Representations of God*, trans. Dinah Livingstone (London-New York: Continuum, 2011).

⁵ Ibid., 221 For more on this, see the above discussion in chapter two. Williams essay 'On Being Creatures' is particularly relevant on this point.

of Cusa²) believes that a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* does not imply a competition between humanity and God, because such a power-competition presupposes that they are in the same category of being – something that orthodox theology rejects.³ And yet still, Williams believes that the critique of religion that Freud made (particularly against the Judeo–Christian tradition) provides avenues for a robust self-critical theology, even an apophatic theology. He says that psychoanalysis helps us by showing ‘the ambiguous, domesticated, fantasy-ridden or self-indulgent functions of our religious language’ and that ‘it pushes us towards the purifications of a negative theology which is constantly suspicious of the religious temptation to seek for absolute knowledge’.⁴

One place where Freud’s influence upon Williams can be clearly seen is a sermon he delivered entitled ‘The Dark Night’.⁵ That Freud’s influence lies in the background of this sermon can be clearly seen from the content.⁶ Here again, the starkness of Williams’ language is apparent: ‘The only defense religion ever has or ever will have against the charge of cozy fantasy is the kind of experience or reflection normally referred to by Christian writers...as the “night of the spirit”...It is the end of religious experience, the very opposite of mysticism...In the middle of all our religious constructs – if we have the honesty to look at it – is an emptiness. It makes nonsense of all religion, conservative or radical, and all piety.’⁷ He goes on to say ‘You must recognize that God is so unlike whatever can be thought or pictured that, when you have got beyond the stage of self-indulgent religiosity, there will be nothing you can securely know or feel. You face a blank and any attempt to avoid that or shy away from it is a return to playing comfortable religious games...The dark night is God’s attack on religion.’⁸

The experience of the dark night, in Williams’ estimation, is the antidote to religious fantasy, an answer to the claim that faith and belief are merely wish-fulfilment. Here we have an experience which cannot be equated self-serving religious projection, because it is precisely the self that is questioned by such an experience. It is not something the human self can inflict upon itself; rather it is something that challenges complacent egotism in a radical way. It is obvious that Williams is proposing such a perspective to counter the critique of religion made by Freud (as well as others like Feuerbach), in the

¹ Cf. Williams, ‘Redeeming Sorrows: Marilyn McCord Adams and the Defeat of Evil’, in *Wrestling with Angels*, 267-268.

² Cf. Williams, ‘Logic and Spirit in Hegel’, in *Wrestling with Angels*, 51, n.14, Williams, ‘Balthasar and Difference’, in *Wrestling with Angels*, 79-80.

³ For a discussion of divine power that contributes, rather than hindering creaturely freedom, see ‘On Being Creatures’. Also, cf. the statement of Williams in *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (Great Britain: Fount, 2000): ‘If we are really to have our language about the transcendence – the sheer, unimaginable *differentness* – of God recreated, it must be by the emptying out of all we thought we knew about it, the emptying out of practically all we normally mean by greatness. No more about the lofty distance of God, the sovereignty that involves control over all circumstances: God’s ‘I am’ can only be heard for what it really is when it has no trace of human power left to it; when it appears as something utterly different from human authority, even human liberty; when it is spoken by a captive under sentence of death. (p. 7)’

⁴ Williams, ‘Freudian Psychology’, 221.

⁵ *A Ray of Darkness*, 80-84. This sermon is undated, and so I am unaware of the exact date of this sermon. However, judging from the introduction, the latest additions to this collection were delivered in 1991, and so it seems to reason that the majority of the sermons were delivered before this date.

⁶ Jeffrey McCurry argued in his dissertation on Williams that Freud clearly ‘inflects’ Williams treatment of ‘the dark night’. For more on this, cf. ‘Traditioned Creativity’, 288-297.

⁷ *A Ray of Darkness*, 80-81.

⁸ *Ibid.* 82. For more on the theme of ‘the dark night’, see Williams, ‘The Dark Night’, in *Gordon Wakefield (ed.), A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM 1983). Cf. especially his comment (p. 104) on Pseudo-Dionysius regarding paradoxical language: ‘The paradox [of light and darkness] affirms that Christian speech is incurably dialectical. No attempt to resolve it even by supposing that there is a communicable and incommunicable ‘part’ of God will do. The illumination is *itself* a revelation of the dimensions of inconclusiveness, challenge, and questioning in all talking about what we refer to as God.’

attempt to retrieve from within the Christian tradition sources that counter-act the move towards religious fantasy.¹

It should be mentioned that in addition to Freud other figures who were (and still are) influential for Williams on the theme of fantasy and ego-projection include Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil. Murdoch once wrote that 'Almost anything that consoles us is a fake'² so that a truly ethical movement towards the Good has to involve a movement beyond the ego. Furthermore, Simone Weil's concept of 'necessity' and 'attentiveness' have thoroughly influenced Williams approach to contemplation, that process where the self is taken outside itself through patience and attentive waiting, not allowing the ego to find easy solutions to the complex and sheer otherness of the world.³ Space does not permit deeper engagement here, but enough has been said to show the influences that impinge upon Williams' thinking on this matter.

The slight divergence from the theme of tragedy and historical consciousness towards the theme of religious fantasy which I have attempted in this section was done with the purpose of explaining why in his sermon of 1984, we see an accented rejection of the fantasy-driven ego. In that sermon, we saw that Williams reception of Eliot after the *Quartets* lectures of 1974-1975 remains pretty much the same, except that there is a stronger emphasis on the theme of fantasy. Here, Williams was concerned to show that an attentive posture towards the reality of tragedy and the apparent meaninglessness of suffering acts as a bulwark against the view that we can construct the world any way we choose. In time, we are limited by the constraints of finitude and contingency; and the concomitant result of this is that we caught up in scenarios and dynamics that are tragic in nature – suffering and pain that cannot be avoided because we live as finite beings in the movements of time. The only way for time to be redeemed is from within time itself. And for Williams (following Eliot), it is the incarnation which provides the hope of time's redemption, for its through entering into the vicissitudes and the stochastic fluctuations of finitude that God's compassion is made manifest, and it is through partaking in that divine movement that we ourselves come to share in God's compassion.

To summarise: here, I aimed to further deepen the question on why Williams is suspicious of fantasy. I showed that Williams concern with speaking truthfully about the self and God arises from his deep engagement with the thought of Augustine. We further showed that in the period between delivering the lectures on Eliot, and his sermon on the same theme, Williams seems to have encountered the thought of Freud in a new way, particularly focusing on his critique of religion as the product of human fantasy, the displacement of human impotence onto the omnipotent Father. The ego desires to be placated and soothed, and so fantasy is an attempt for the ego to achieve 'wholeness' against the fragmented desire it experiences. For Williams (and for Freud), this is the root of self-serving religiosity. However, Williams argues that there are traditions within Christianity which

¹ To read up more on this discussion, namely the relation between contemplation and religious critique, particularly in relation to Freud and Feuerbach, see Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2004), 99-119. Buckley also points out the differences between Freud and Feuerbach in their respective critiques of religion, and he also charts the development and maturation of Freud's critique.

² Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London-New York: Routledge, 1970), 59.

³ Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: G.P Putnam's Sons, 1951). Also, cf. Simone Weil 'Attention and Will' in Siân Miles (ed.), *Simone Weil: An Anthology* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1986), 211-217. This is not to say that Williams is uncritical of Weil's more self-lacerating moments. For his appreciation and critique of Weil, see Williams, 'Simone Weil and the Necessary Non-Existence of God', in *Wrestling with Angels*, 203-227.

act against a conclusion that spirituality is merely human fancy; the experience of the dark night (as expounded by figures like John of the Cross) point towards something different.

The connections here between the theme of fantasy and tragedy become clearer. As we saw in *Quartets* lectures (and the sermon that came later), the attempt to escape time and its tragic consequences, either through fantasy, or the 'the timeless moment' cannot be a solution to the problems time proposes. Tragedy forces us to acknowledge that we are always subject to curtailment and limitation, to non-closure in our engagements with the world. The desire of fantasy is to achieve an escape from time and limitation, to move beyond creaturely finitude. The move beyond continuing desire is essentially part of the ego's defense mechanisms, an attempt to move into a world without friction, without difficulty. The sheer particularity of tragedy resists the idea that we can project any vision onto the world, that the world is simply a product of our perspectival fantasy.

To conclude this chapter, it might be helpful quote from a text in which all of these themes appear in order to show more explicitly how the problem of fantasy and self-protection relates to Williams later theology. Jumping to a more recent time, while Williams was still the incumbent Archbishop of Canterbury, he delivered a sermon on Shakespeare Sunday in 2006, where he described the artist and poet in the following words:

'Something is missing in the poet, some habit of self-defence that allows most of us not to know a lot of what we'd rather not know, some inner adjusting mechanism that leaves words and images and sensations where we found them and stops us sensing the frightening weave and crossover of language and impression that gives the world a new shape...Authority, whether in religious or poetic speech, or both, arises from the acceptance of the wound, the resolve to live with one's own undefendedness so that certain things in the human world are never forgotten or reduced... [I]f poetry makes nothing happen¹, what poetry makes visible is what does change the world... It is not the poetic ego that moves things; it is what the poetic lack or frailty of ego allows to emerge, what the poet knows and allows us to know. This is what will destroy and build; this is the strength of what imagination uncovers...of what he [Shakespeare] has allowed us to see that we should otherwise have ignored or shrunk from, he has brought into our imagination that compassion he now asks us to show him.'²

What can be seen here is that several of the themes that are elaborated in different essays and sermons come together. The emphasis on *contemplation*, mainly in the form of the poetic openness to reality that lies beyond the ego, is present here. Such a poetic openness implies a kind of passivity, a weakness in which the poet is progressively disillusioned of his or her fantasies, and becomes open to the experience of *compassion*, whereby we are able to sympathise and imaginatively inhabit a perspective that cannot be reduced to the solitary ego. Furthermore, the possibilities and insights that are opened by such an artistic posture of attentiveness to the world open the way for protest against

¹ Williams is referencing here Auden's statement that 'poetry makes nothing happen' (to be found in the poem 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats').

² Williams, 'A Sermon for Shakespeare Sunday' (2006). Accessed from the <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org>, 11/28/2013, n.p. I owe this reference to Ben Myers.

the present order of the world. Even though poetry cannot 'do' anything, it can supply us with new imaginative possibilities and perceptions which can be part of the process of change. The patience, passivity, and the waiting which poetic creation imply, make possible a new *vision*, an ability to see an *alternative* world within the world we inhabit. Williams' reflections here in this sermon confirm what we have found elsewhere.

To relate these ideas again to the theme of tragedy, a focused attention to the reality of the tragic provides us with a paradigmatic example of what cannot be reduced to simplistic reduction or included in the fantastical projections of the ego. The paramount *difficulty* that tragedy impinges on us, the lack of clear resolution that it proposes, and the reality of human suffering therein revealed bring to attention what is sheerly intractable in the world we inhabit. In Williams' opinion, a *contemplative* attention to the tragic disorderedness of the world provides an opportunity to be open to the world as it is, in all its irreparable *thereness*. It is in this experience that possibilities for poetic creation and protest are awakened, as well as *compassionate* co-suffering with the world.

In the following chapter, we will deal a little more with Williams' reflections on the difficulty of tragedy and the problem of closure (in relation to Williams' reception of MacKinnon). We shall also seek to expound a little more his thoughts on the topic of theodicy (particularly in his dialogue with Marilyn McCord Adams), as well as some texts relating to temporality, politics and Christology.

5. *The Shattered Mosaic*

My concern in this chapter is to deal with some of Williams' later texts which are related to the theme I have been discussing. Amongst these texts, we will include Williams' most sustained engagement with the thought of his teacher Donald MacKinnon, particularly as it relates to MacKinnon's reflections on the theme of tragedy. In this essay, Williams seeks to emphasize MacKinnon's own plea for a resolute attention to the tragic and its insistent refusal to be reduced to any harmonizing or explanatory schemas. I will also engage with Williams' essay on Marilyn McCord Adams, in which he gives a thoughtful critique of her theodicy project, and also provides suggestive indications of his own response to the problem of evil. The essential problem with Adams' theodicy – in Williams' opinion – is that the problem of evil is again being reduced to a generalised theory, and that it fails to be attentive to the unique and particular existential problems that suffering provokes. Williams is suspicious of any sweeping resolutions to the problem of evil, and it seems that Williams places Adams' own philosophically and theologically provocative attempt at a response to this problem as one more attempt within this general tendency among various theodicy projects. I will close this section in reference to Williams' own application of this perspective in his public addresses regarding the 2004 Tsunami, which reflect the themes we have been dealing with. Thereafter, I will attempt to expound some miscellaneous texts in which the themes of contingency and temporal boundedness are brought in conversation with the topic of tragedy. We shall not say anything new here, but simply show how in some of Williams' later texts the theme of creaturely finitude is related to reality of the tragic. Bringing into mind here the broad leitmotifs that have been mentioned before throughout this thesis, we will show that the emphasis on *non-closure*, *compassion*, *contemplation*, and *contingency* come to the fore in these later texts.

Furthermore, I will also seek to briefly engage with Williams' understanding of politics, particularly as this is refracted through the conflictual modes of politics suggested by Gillian Rose, and her reading of Hegel. Herein, the tragic theme of *contingency* and *conflict* form an important part of Williams' understanding of human political engagement since for Williams (and Rose) there is no abstract or neutral point of engagement, but one that is already involved in the 'negativity' of social interaction. One can only seek to inhabit the 'the broken middle' which is not simply a mediating position between two opposing viewpoints, but rather a practice whereby we stake a 'position' within continued discourse that remains open for transformation and dialogue. Thereafter, I will engage very briefly with some of Williams' recent reflections on theme of Christology and temporality, mainly focusing on his discussion of Prince Myshkin as to be found in his book on Dostoevsky.

In the last section of the chapter, I will spend some time on Williams' theology of the Trinity and its relation to tragedy. This part of the chapter will be a response to some comments made by Ben Myers in this regard.

5.1 'Trinity and Ontology' (1986)

Williams' most detailed exposition of the theme of the tragic is to be found in his contribution to a *Festschrift* (1989) compiled in honour of his teacher Donald MacKinnon. The paper was originally read at conference in 1986, in which MacKinnon's theology was the central theme. This essay is republished in Williams' own collection of essays entitled *On Christian Theology* (2000), compiled and published before he took over the see of Canterbury. Before we expound this essay, it should be said that not everything said in this essay would be endorsed by Williams today. The most outstanding difference between Williams' exposition of this theme (between then and now) would be his interpretation of Hegel. In 1986, Williams' interpretation of Hegel still fell within a consensus interpretation in which Hegel's philosophy was understood at that time. The general consensus among many interpreters of Hegel's thought was that Hegel exemplified, in a paramount fashion, a systematic vision of history, one in which all contradictions and discontinuities would be reconciled in the Absolute. Such an interpretation would have difficulty in accounting for any non-resolvable remainder that the reality of suffering and tragedy might pose, since it implies a strongly teleological or harmonizing resolution to history. However, sometime after 1986, when Williams was in his late thirties, his view on Hegel began to change, mainly through the instigation of his pupil Andrew Shanks, and the philosopher Gillian Rose. As a result of this influence, Williams began to see Hegel as a philosopher of contradiction and opposition, rather than of totality and systematic harmonization.¹ Such an about-face in Williams' interpretation has created a situation in which his understanding of the tragic possibilities of human engagement is inflected with a distinctly Hegelian perspective.² Nonetheless, all of this is being said simply to qualify what shall be said below: while Williams' perspective on tragedy and its relation to theology continues to be inflected by the work of MacKinnon (as presented in the essay to be discussed), not everything in this essay would be endorsed by Williams today. Our discussion of Williams' more mature appropriation of Hegel is postponed until later in this chapter.

Moving onto the essay itself, Williams introduces his discussion with a brief and dense of discussion of MacKinnon's involvement in the realism-idealism debate. Williams is by no means uncritical of MacKinnon in this discussion, but he understands that MacKinnon's insistence on realism is bound up with his emphasis on the reality of the tragic. MacKinnon's 'negative metaphysics'³, and his stalwart focus on tragic realism is interpreted by Williams to be a resolute antithesis against any attempt to understand the subject and human volition as 'world-causing'⁴ and is a part of his project 'to demythologize a free, triumphant, endlessly resourceful, sovereign willing self.'⁵ Idealism as a philosophical project fails to the extent that it is unable to grasp the fact that suffering and tragedy cannot be understood as a construct of the mind, that there are certain things (like the tragic) which

¹ Ben Myers has an excellent short discussion of this theme in *Christ the Stranger*, 51-58. For more on this, see Shortt, *God's Advocates*, 16-17.

² To see the influence of this change on Williams' later thought, see Williams, 'Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity [1992]', 'Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose [1995]', 'Logic and Spirit in Hegel [1998]', in *Wrestling with Angels*, 25-34, 35-52, 53-76.

³ Williams, 'Trinity and Ontology', in *On Christian Theology*, 152.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 154

impress and 'show' themselves, and therefore cannot be reduced to a projection of the human will. Placing this debate in the background illuminates what Williams has to say further on this matter. This becomes apparent as we move onto the second part of the essay; he begins by stating the following: 'If the world is our creation, or even if the world is masterable as a system of necessities, the idea of irreparable and uncontrollable loss ceases to make sense: there are no tragedies'. He goes on to say that 'All explanation of suffering is an attempt to forget it as suffering, and so a quest for untruthfulness...The resolution of the sheer resistant particularity of suffering, past and present, into comfortable teleological patterns is bound to blunt the edge of particularity, and so to lie; and this lying resolution contains that kind of failure in attention that is itself a moral deficiency, a fearful self-protection. It is just this that fuels the fantasy that we can choose how the world and myself shall be.'¹ Here we can see how in a dense manner several of the themes we have been dealing with thus far come together. Teleology in relation to human suffering is understood to be an attempt at closure, an attempt which avoids the fundamental *difficulty* of the tragic itself. Further, we can see the theme of fantasy (which is linked to the motif of *contemplation*) recurs again here and is tied explicitly with the moral dimension that we have spoken about before in relation to the self-sufficiency of the human ego: 'The world is such – *is*, independently of our choice and our fabrication – that we cannot think away particulars into comprehensive explanatory systems; the world is such that attention to particularity is demanded of us.'² If we are to speak of God, can we do so in a way that does not amount to another evasion of the world.'³ He goes on to expound the concept of projection and fantasy in a rather dense paragraph:

'There is a way of talking about God that simply projects on to him what we cannot achieve—a systematic vision of the world as a necessarily inter-related whole. Trust in such a God is merely deferred confidence in an exhaustive explanation and justification; a deferred confidence of this sort is open to exactly the same moral and logical objection as any other confidence in systematic necessity of this kind in the world. A God whose essential function is to negate the 'otherness' and discontinuity of historical experience, and so to provide for us an ideal *locus standi*, a perspective transcending or reconciling discontinuity in the system, is clearly an idol, and an incoherent one at that: if he is the negation of the reciprocal negations or exclusions of worldly subjects, either he is the completion of the process of historical dialectic (in which case he cannot strictly provide a *locus standi* outside it for us *now*, as there is no alternative to living through the dialectic); or else he is simply a further object, of a rather unusual kind, standing in opposition to the rest of objects that there are (in which case there is no ultimate overcoming of discontinuity).'⁴

What Williams seems to be wrestling with here is the problem of divine transcendence in relation to the contingent realities of the world. The attempt to understand God as an 'organizing principle' or an

¹ Ibid., 154-155.

² The echoes here of Simone Weil's concepts of 'attention' and 'necessity' should not be forgotten here.

³ 'Trinity and Ontology', 155.

⁴ Ibid., 155-156.

'abstract postulate' ultimately ties God's identity to the world in a way that a classical Christian theology should avoid ('...God is in no sense *made to be* what he is by the sum total of worldly fact'¹). The problem then becomes how do we understand God's relation to the world, particularly as it becomes manifest in the history of Jesus Christ. Williams goes on to discuss Christological issues, and particularly draws on MacKinnon's insistence that we focus on the *tragic* in the narrative of Jesus, as well as the particularity of Jesus' historical existence.² Within this context, namely the relation of God to the man Jesus Christ and the substance of Christological reflection, Williams says that we cannot speak about this issue while bypassing 'the context of *limit* – the limits of particularity, of bodiliness and mortality, of moral capacity, of creatureliness'.³ As we can see again, the problem of limit and contingency here comes into focus, something that we have argued is intrinsically a part of Williams' construal of the tragic. In Christ, we can say that God has constituted a finite and contingent life that is 'paradigmatically *creaturely*, distanced from God' in which God has become a 'sheer externality' that constitutes the divine 'identity-in-difference', an 'identity in distance or absence'.⁴ For Christ to live in time is to live within 'temporal process' and the 'risk' that temporality entails, and this concrete story of 'risk and consummation' provides us with the language to talk about God as Source (Father) and God as Begotten (Son), in which the Father provides a kind of 'externality' or 'limit' for the Son and thereby the identity-in-difference of the Trinitarian persons. In Williams' words: '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'.⁵

However, it should be mentioned here that Williams clearly wants to distinguish himself here from a 'Hegelian'⁶ understanding of the Trinity whereby 'Christ's union with the Father as enacted in history on to eternity (and so destroys the proper contingency and unresolved or tragic limitedness of that and every history)'.⁷ Furthermore, he also wants to distinguish his view (which is basically a classical treatment) from any doctrine of the Trinity that makes God's identity dependent on these contingent events (a view which he attributes to Moltmann). For Williams, the immanent Trinity makes the story of Jesus 'possible and intelligible', since it is 'the ground and 'form' of this encounter', but this is not the same as saying that 'God would not be God' if it were not for these unique events.⁸

¹ Ibid., 156. It should be said here that Williams has in mind here the so-called 'monist ontologies' of Plotinus, Hegel, and Marx. As already said, Williams' interpretation of Hegel here (1986) would be rejected by Williams today.

² On this, see MacKinnon, 'Some Notes on the Irreversibility of Time' in *Explorations in Theology*, 96-98. This reference is taken from Williams' essay. Some recurrent examples that MacKinnon uses in relation to this theme are the relation between Jesus and the damnation of Judas, and link between the cross and the history of anti-Semitism. Williams comments (p. 157) on this (while speaking on Jesus' 'sinlessness') by saying that '...sinlessness can only be a judgement passed on the *entirety* of a life in which the inevitable damage done by human beings to each other has not sealed up the possibility of compassionate and creative relationship (even those most deeply injured: what could one say here of the relation here between the figure of Jesus and post-Holocaust Judaism, as perceived by modern Jewish writers. Does this give a hint of what the content of 'sinlessness' might be?)'.

³ Ibid., 158. Williams is referencing here MacKinnon's suggestion for an 'analogy of limits' in relation to Christological and Trinitarian reflection.

⁴ Ibid., 158.

⁵ Ibid., 161.

⁶ Williams' interpretation of a 'Hegelian' doctrine of the Trinity would be very different today. However, Williams' comments here still have force for a contemporary interpretation of his thought, as long as the focus remains on the main point of his critique, namely the separation of the story of Christ (and the doctrine of the Trinity that is entwined with it) from its contingent enactment.

⁷ Ibid., 160.

⁸ Ibid., 160-161.

In the last portion of the essay, Williams (like MacKinnon before him) seeks to bring out the ethical and moral dimensions of the tragic. Here again the reality of creaturely limit and contingency come to the fore. Williams while expounding this writes that ‘the tragic *by definition* deals with human limit; that is, with what is not to be changed. There is pain in the world that is, so to speak, non-negotiable. The suffering that *has* happened and cannot be made not to have happened (the irreversibility of time) is, in spite of various kinds of vacuous, insulting and brutal rhetoric, religious and political, unchangeably there for us’. He does say that ‘There can be a paralysing obsession with the tragic’ but goes onto suggest that ‘there can also be an attempt to bypass and rationalize the pain and death’.¹

It is attention to this tragic dimension in reality that provides a resource for moral and ethical armament. In Williams’ estimation, an attentive posture towards the tragic that manifests itself in history, and particularly the radical limitation which it reveals, provides us with a moral vision that leads to protest against powers and dynamics that would efface such limitation, because ‘it is *one’s own* appropriation of the limits of possibility, in protest against a polity and a culture that lure us to sink our truthful perceptions in a collective, mythologized identity that can shut its eyes to limits.’² Williams goes into expound this a little further and in more detail by saying ‘No one acts without perceiving something. And if that is so, the disjunction between interpretation and transformation becomes less absolute. If interpretation is not an explanatory reduction, but the gradual formation of a ‘world’ in which realities can be seen and endured without illusion...interpretation does not happen because an individual or individuals invent a set of symbols. The possible world of truthful perception depends on what has been concretely *made* possible, however precariously and impermanently, for actual persons in communication with each other.’³

Regarding tragedy more specifically, he writes that tragedy is ‘capable of being lived with and articulated because...of the particular, the narratively specific, out of which certain kinds of new language grow.’⁴ What Williams seems to be saying here is that an attentive attitude towards the reality of limitation and the particular contours that tragedy puts before us, form and create within us a perceptive ability to see the world without illusion and fantasy, and therefore able to speak and act in ways that are more truthful and open to resistant thereness of the world. And it is in confrontation with that which ‘shows’ itself in the world, with that which cannot be the mere result of our projectionist whims, that we are confronted with a reality that requires new language to make sense of it, a language which has the moral backbone to take account of the sheer fact of human suffering and misery, without resorting to reductive fantasy or evasive strategies of the ego.

Thus far, the essay has mainly focused on Christological issues, but Williams goes a little further (beyond MacKinnon) to expound a theology of the Spirit in relation to this theme. Alluding to the work

¹ Ibid., 162-163.

² Ibid., 163. One can fruitfully compare Williams’ statements here to Giorgio Agamben’s short essay entitled ‘On What We Can Not Do’, in Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 43-45.

³ Ibid. 163-164. Williams goes on to apply this perspective to the problem of racism in Britain (p. 164): ‘To confront both the suffering of the victims of racism and my own *de facto* involvement in the responsibility for this, without fantasizing and self-lacerating guilt, requires specific encounter and the possibility of its continuance; not reconciliation, but a kind of commitment without evasion. The ‘reading’ of our situation in certain terms rests on existing small-scale transformations – and also, of course, assists in the creation of further transformation.’ On this point, one should compare Williams to Nicholas Lash in relation to his understanding of ‘performance’ and ‘interpretation’ which is central to demonstrating the ‘truth’ of Christian belief. On this, see the essays collected in Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986).

⁴ Ibid., 164.

of John Milbank on the spirit¹, he says that 'The encounter of the Spirit with Christ is potentially an encounter with our own complicity in the cross, and so with the crosses of our own making in the present and the past; it should, then, if it is what it claims to be, form a central strand in Christian protest in transforming *action*'. However, he also suggests that attention to the tragic can 'hold us to penitence, the acknowledgement that our present possibilities are shaped by our past, that limit remains inescapable; and so it can save us from facile and shallow utopianism, which so readily spills over into authoritarian expression.'²

This quotation again bears witness to some of the themes he have discussed previously³, particularly as we sought to show the connection between the work of the Spirit, attentiveness, and resistant protest against the disorderedness of reality. Rather than leading to passivity or a mere resignation to fate, a culture of attentiveness to the limits and tragic entanglements of reality cultivates a *moral* awareness which is not satisfied with the way things are, thereby leading to *protest* against the status quo, and to *repentance* in relation to our own contribution towards the suffering of others. As can be seen from this, Williams' understanding of tragedy does not necessarily imply an ultimately pessimistic and resigned posture towards the flow of immanent movements, but rather an ethical stance of *resistance* towards those powers that would seek to overthrow limitations, those circumscribed boundaries of created life to which we are all subject.

And so I should summarise what we have seen in this essay thus far. I have shown that Williams' is resistant to any explanatory structures in relation to the indelible thereness of tragedy. While Williams would distance himself from any romanticizing of tragedy, he would argue that the problem of human suffering and the tragic present us (in a paramount fashion) with the problem of *non-closure* in the sense that no other wider structure can account for or provide a framework into which it can be understood or finalized but continues to present us with a resistant *difficulty* that has to be continually wrestled with.⁴ Any attempt to blunt the force of human suffering and the actuality of the tragic results in a failure of moral awareness and sensitivity to the sheer magnitude of the problem. Such an acknowledgement of this (in relation to the inherent non-resolution of tragedy) is bound up with what we have seen elsewhere in relation to the fundamental *contemplative* stance in the work of Williams. Contemplation is essentially an attitude of openness and attention to reality as it presents itself, not seeking to evade it or confine it within the constraints that the human ego provides. And in relation to tragedy, we are confronted with, in a paradigmatic way, with something that is phenomenologically resistant to all attempts to circumscribe or explain. And further, one can say that such a contemplative stance is bound up with the formation of a moral sensitivity to *otherness* (both human and non-human) as it presents itself within our existential milieu. Such an attention to otherness further entwined the nurturing of a *compassionate* ethic which the particularity of human suffering is taken seriously and given dignity.

¹ Milbank, 'The Second Difference: For a Trinitarianism Without Reserve'. *Modern Theology* 2(1986), 213-234. This essay was published the same year as this conference on MacKinnon took place.

² 'Trinity and Ontology', 165.

³ Namely, in our discussion of Williams' essays 'The Spirit of the Age to Come' and 'Poetic and Religious Imagination'.

⁴ It is useful to remember Paul Janz (*God, the Mind's Desire*, 174) in reference his discussion of the tragic in the work of MacKinnon, where by states that tragedy presents us in a way like no other with 'a *finality of non-resolution*' in the sense that it remains 'a sheerly intractable, non-negotiable, empirically and morally indefeasible finality that 'stumps' every conceivable theodicy, rationalization or apologetic strategy.'

5.2. Redeeming Sorrows' (1991)

In this section, we will deal with Williams' own perspective on the so-called theodicy project. Such a project (officially commenced in the Enlightenment but whose exact beginning cannot be measured¹) is by no means unified or fully coherent, but is concerned centrally with the question: *Si Deus est, unde malum? Si non est, unde bonum?* Theological reflection on the problem of evil is a highly contentious affair, and has been subject to various formulations (and critiques, for example by Kant²) from the times of the Epicureans through Leibniz (who coined the term 'theodicy'³). Such a discussion continues until the present day, and does not seem to be coming to a resolution any time soon. Because of this, I cannot attempt to even come close to a comprehensive treatment in the space given here.⁴ The *modus operandi* here – as elsewhere in this monograph – is to expound a particular text as it relates to our theme, and see what contributions and advancements the text-in-question makes. As has been assumed throughout, the problem of human suffering is bound up with discourse about tragedy; and further: while acknowledging that we cannot assume that the questions and central problems of questions related to evil have remained the same throughout the history of Christian considerations of this theme⁵, it seems an unquestionable fact that the reality of human suffering has provided a problem for theological thought and existential reflection until the present day. And since the central problem of tragedy is concerned with vulnerability, limit, contingency and the reality of suffering, avoiding some kind of attention to Williams' construal of the theodicy project would leave gap in our discussion, which is why I have chosen to deal with it here.

The occasion for Williams' reflection on theodicy and the problem of suffering was a conference held in Claremont Graduate University (1991). The essays delivered were published later in a collection of papers gathered from this conference (1996).⁶ Williams' contribution to this conference constituted a response to a paper given by Marilyn McCord Adams at the same conference. Adams is known for her trenchant philosophical treatments of theodicy, particularly as they relate to the problem of what she calls 'horrendous evil', namely those evils which are of such intensity and magnitude that they constitute a *prima facie* argument against someone being able to gather a

¹ Terrence Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 221-255.

² For an excellent and accessible discussion of Kant surrounding these issues, see Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 57-84.

³ For an excellent survey and history of the 'theodicy-project', see Dalferth, *Malum*, 38-76; 160-213. Dalferth engages in a reappraisal of Leibniz's project, and shows that Leibniz advocated a belief in a creative God of love and redemption, not just reason or power, and that it is within this context that his espousal of the present world as the 'best possible' world should be understood.

⁴ I cannot even do justice in a footnote to the amount of literature on this problem. I can only mention a few that I have found useful; they include: Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Surin, *The Turnings of Darkness and Light*, 57-90; Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990); Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 39-95; Terrence Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, 89ff.; David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005); Karen Kilby, 'Evil and the Limits of Theology'. *New Blackfriars* 84.938 (2007), 13-29; Charles T. Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, 36-43; Dalferth, *Malum*, 38-76, 160-213; Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010); Friedrich Hemmann, 'Hiob und das Theodizeeproblem in der Philosophie', in Edmund Runggaldier and Benedikt Schick (eds.), *Letztbegründungen und Gott* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 50-66; Terry Eagleton, *On Evil* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁵ Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, 1-37, where he shows that modern theodical appropriations of Irenaeus and Augustine are problematic; and Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, 83-140, where he speaks on Job and Augustine, and how these texts make it difficult to construct a theodicy from them.

⁶ The original collection of essays was published in D.Z. Phillips (ed.), *Religion and Morality*. Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 132-148. The same essay was republished in Higton, *Wrestling with Angels*, 255-274, and is entitled 'Redeeming Sorrows: Marilyn McCord Adams and the Defeat of Evil'.

symbolic or 'aesthetic' victory over suffering. In Adams' opinion, such evil can only be overcome by such an individual coming into a relation with a God whose being is characterized by infinite goodness.¹ Central to Adams' theodicy project is the problem of proportionality; in her opinion, life has to have some kind of balance to it if ultimate happiness is to be achieved. However, if suffering outweighs happiness, or suffering reaches horrific proportions such that meaning or balance cannot be achieved, this is where a symbolic collapse occurs, and it is this reality that theodicy has to deal with.

It is precisely this 'aesthetic' theory of proportionality that Williams takes issue with. While Williams acknowledges that Adams does take account of individual appropriations in relation to the experience of suffering, Williams suggests that the sheer fact that people experience suffering in different ways points in a different direction away from 'the pseudo-aesthetic mode in talking about such matters'.² Williams goes on to expound this a little further by saying that 'What makes an experience bearable for one person and the final and intolerable blow for another is, of course, in large measure what they have been made by previous experience. That is to say, we cannot take 'experiences' as psychological atoms that can be assessed on a scale of proportionateness to each other and to an imagined whole.' He explains further: 'There is, philosophically speaking, no such thing as 'an' experience, capable of being unproblematically isolated and assessed. Rather, our interaction with what we do not choose or control, our environment, develops and modifies what we sense and say of ourselves; and we do not know in advance what a new stage in this interaction will do to our linguistic and narrative construction of who we are.'³

Williams' concern with such an 'aesthetic' solution to the problem of evil, in which 'horrendous evils' are ultimately defeated by the incommensurate goodness of God, is that it too hastily assumes that 'no human outcome could heal the effects of appalling injury'. Furthermore, he worries that 'the notion of humanly unhealable hurts should not be used as a device to bring in the need for divine (unmediated?) consolation.'⁴ In other words, Williams senses that the language of proportionally overwhelming suffering is being used to introduce God as a solution to the problem. But Williams remains unconvinced that this is how people deal with suffering (even horrific suffering) in real life; the language of 'proportion' is unable to deal with the complexity and diversity of actual human experience. For some people, meaning can be wrested from life even when the injury and the pain they have received seem overwhelming. For others, something apparently minor (from an observer's standpoint) can be the undoing of their symbolic universe. Williams' suspicion is that Adams' 'aesthetic' approach ultimately privileges 'the observer's standpoint' and turns 'the question of how evil is to be lived' into 'the question of how a satisfactory object can be constructed', which results in making 'the problem more mine than the sufferer's'.⁵

¹ For a summary of her theodicy project, see Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca – New York: Cornell University Press, 1999).

² Williams, 'Redeeming Sorrows', 257.

³ *Ibid.*,

⁴ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 259. Adams' favourite analogy for such an 'aesthetic' approach is the one used by Roderick Chisholm. Using the language of 'balancing off' and 'defeat', Adams argues that if we examine a painting (by Monet for example), we can examine it closely and see that there are 'ugly' bits (viewed atomistically), but that ultimately the 'ugly' bits have to be 'balanced' with more beautiful bits in order for the painting to achieve an aesthetic completion. If the 'ugly' bits outweigh the beautiful bits, then the aesthetic unity of the painting is 'defeated' by the more unseemly sections of the painting. Williams is unconvinced by such

Williams goes on to discuss in a little more detail Christological issues and the question of divine suffering. Here, Williams objects to the speaking about God suffering in ‘exactly’ the same way as humans suffer. Following from what Williams has said earlier, since suffering always occurs within a specific context (resulting in differing interpretative acts), we cannot say that when God ‘suffers’ God experiences such an occurrence in the same way as humans do.¹ God’s identification with the human story of Jesus in his passion and resurrection tells us that ‘God in Christ assumes not only humanity in general but humanity specifically in its vulnerability. Because the life of God incarnate is worked out, articulated, in a human biography in which acute physical and mental suffering occur, such suffering cannot be held to be in itself an absolute obstacle to perfect and conscious union with God; indeed, it may seem as part of the concrete working out of God’s will, not in the sense that God actively wills particular sufferings but because the way in which sufferings are endured becomes an aspect of the way in which the love and generosity of God are made concrete and historical.’²

It is such concreteness that Williams seeks to emphasise, rather than finding a solution in some generalized or ‘abstract’ account of divine love, he asserts that ‘If the love of God is simply an overwhelming tide of ‘positive experience’ that can be guaranteed to swallow up any and all specific negative experiences, we are left with nothing to say about particular ways in which suffering damages the self and the particular needs that are to be met in healing it. The ‘indifference’ of divine love is in danger of becoming an abstraction that ultimately devalues particular histories, and the promise of a specific healing or wiping away of tears is reduced to the promise of a maximally positive experience for all one day.’ Williams goes on to speak more personally by saying that ‘this is also the ground for my unease with the idea that the resolution of earthly pains of a specifically acute kind must lie in an unmediated experience of divine love – as if the love of God could now be bestowed on an individual subject without the intervention of a ‘world’; as if we could make sense of a notion of experience that bypassed the world – our environment, our history and language, our essential interconnectedness with other subjects. Here there raises its head the familiar spectre of a philosophical ethos that regards the world as a regrettable barrier between the subject and truth.’³

Together with this critique of a lack of particularity in Adams’ account of divine love, Williams also has problems with Adams’ construal of divine action. I shall not go into detail here in his relation to his critique of Adams on this point, but it essentially comes down to his belief that Adams’ theodicy presupposes a view of divine action that has a similarity to a kind of divine ‘crisis management’ in which God’s action is fundamentally ‘reactive’ in relation to the world, rather than being the final ‘cause’ or ‘context’ of the world and creaturely activity in general.⁴ Williams is following here the tradition of Aquinas, and particularly the tradition of Nicholas of Cusa in relation to the God as *non*

analogy; for him, such an atomistic perspective fails in the artistic realm, and leads him to question its application in the realm of human experience. However, Adams seems undeterred on this matter, and it continues to remain a central feature of her theodicy project. On this, see Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, 17-31. Nonetheless, one should not equate Adams’ approach with Chisholm’s one since Adams seem to advance a more nuanced, post-Chisholmian approach to an ‘aesthetic’ theodicy. For this, see *Ibid.*, 129-151.

¹ *Ibid.*, 260-262. It should be pointed out here that one can see a marked development in Williams’ thought on this matter. When one compares what he says here with some of the statements contained in his *Quartet* lectures, we can see a movement towards a more ‘classical’ approach to this question.

² *Ibid.*, 260-261.

³ *Ibid.*, 263-264.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 266-271.

aliud.¹ The imagery of God stepping into the picture with overwhelming love in response to the occurrence of horrendous suffering is modelled (in Williams' opinion) on *human* action – except that God's action occurs at a more profound scale. And this raises some rather difficult and problematic questions for any theodicy conceived along this line of divine action: 'If God has continually to intervene when created choices become (disproportionately?) destructive on a large scale, is the world as originally created incapable of realising the divine purpose? And if God is capable of endless damage limitation apparently envisaged here, is God not capable of creating an environment where this sort of intervention is less necessary? And so on'.²

Towards the end of his essay, Williams summarises his critique of theodicy projects in general. In his opinion, theodicy either seeks to minimize the magnitude of suffering (by making it seem that it is not as bad as it actually is, given the wider scope of God's action in the world), or it attempts to point toward a perspective which we do not have access to at the moment, in the here and now, towards some kind of eschatological epiphany in which suffering will be healed and made sensible. However, Williams wonders whether such a perspective avoids dealing with the sheer quantity of human suffering, and with the reality that we have to live now live with many stories and events in which healing and consolation remain elusive (one only has to think of the many stories related to sexual abuse, rape, genocide, and the Shoah to exemplify this reality). In light of such realities, Williams wonders whether 'Perhaps it is time for philosophers of religion to look away from theodicy – not appeal blandly to the mysterious purposes of God, not to appeal to any putative justification at all, but to put the question of how we remain faithful to *human* ways of seeing suffering, even and especially when we are thinking from a religious perspective.' He goes on to say that, speaking of bodiliness and finitude that 'Part of the task of good theology and candid religious philosophy is...to reacquaint us with our materiality and mortality. And part of that is the knowledge of suffering without explanation or compensation – and also the knowledge, of course, that there are unpredictable, unsystematisable integrations of suffering into a biography in the experience of some.' Going further, he says that 'we should be worrying about seeing suffering always in its historical particularity: this, here, for this person, at this moment, with these memories...In plain English...it is more religiously imperative to be worried by evil than to put it into a satisfactory theoretical context, if only because such a worry keeps obstinately open the perspective of the sufferer, the subject, for whom this is never a question of aesthetics, however imaginatively and discriminately pursued'.³

As can be seen here, Williams is arguing against any perspective that would seek to provide a general answer to the problem of suffering, that is, any theory which bypasses the perspective of the one who is suffering. Here Williams' emphasis on particularity and concreteness become apparent, as well as his fundamental *contemplative* attitude towards the reality of suffering and tragedy. Rather than seeking to explain or to give a metaphysical framework in which human suffering makes sense, Williams again emphasises an attention to particular narratives of suffering, some of which are truly horrifying and resist any justificatory attempts of theodicy. For Williams, in the words of Iris Murdoch,

¹ Cf. n.1-2 on p.118 above.

² *Ibid.* 267.

³ *Ibid.* 271-272. It should be said that Williams' perspective on Adams' on theodicy has not changed since he penned this essay. In his interview with Rupert Shortt (*God's Advocates*, 9-12), he reaffirmed his position in relation to Adams' theodicy.

the question is 'How is one to connect the realism which must involve a clear-eyed contemplation of the misery of the world with a sense of an uncorrupted good without the latter idea becoming the merest consolatory dream?...It is very difficult to concentrate attention upon suffering and sin, in others and oneself, without falsifying the picture in some way while making it bearable.'¹ However, as Murdoch also writes later in the same book: 'There is something in the serious attempt to look compassionately at human things which automatically suggests "there is more than this" even if "Only the greatest art can manage it".'² Therefore, for Williams (and Murdoch) *contemplation* and *compassion* give us a perspective to acknowledge 'there is more than this', while maintaining the art of non-evasion in relation to the difficulty that suffering poses. Attentiveness to the *otherness* of the sufferer's perspective opens us to an ethic of *compassion* in which we learn to open ourselves to what is truly different and strange in the other. This is thoroughly implied by Williams' plea to attend to human stories of sufferings. But it is also apparent in his reference to divine action when he says that 'if God is compassionate towards the world, this is not self-pity, but the exercise of that radical love which is attention to the other in its difference, not its kinship; thus in its specificity within the world that is not-God.'³ Here divine love is viewed in the model of compassion, whereby the sympathetic action occurs to the extent that we do not claim the other's suffering as *our own*, but seek to the best of our ability to enter into 'the world'⁴ of the sufferer. Such a model of divine compassion would (presumably) lay the foundation for human action, in which we partake through a continuing analogical union with God's own action in the world.

To concretize some of these points, we can see that Williams revealed this basic orientation in his public responses to the Boxing Day Tsunami in 2004.⁵ In a piece originally written for *The Sunday Telegraph* (January 2, 2005), Williams poignantly spoke about how it is precisely the *particularity* of victims that makes suffering so horrifying⁶, and furthermore that it is precisely this difficulty that makes giving 'explanations' for suffering so intractable.⁷ Seeking for resolutions to the problem of suffering, additionally, leads to questionable theologies regarding divine nature⁸ and cannot ultimately bring comfort to those who are suffering atrociously. Nonetheless, faith continues to survive such disasters because people find it difficult to deny that they have 'learned to see the world and life in the world as

¹ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 61, 73.

² *Ibid.*, 73. It should be mentioned that Iris Murdoch was also a student of Donald MacKinnon, so we should not be surprised at the similarities between Williams and Murdoch on this point.

³ 'Redeeming Sorrows', 272. Williams uses this analysis of compassion to argue *against* the idea that God has to experience suffering in the same way that humans experience suffering. For Williams, as he has argued earlier in this essay, suffering always occurs within a narrative context so that the individual's appropriation of that suffering cannot be generalized. He uses this to argue against the idea that God suffers in the same manner as we do. Furthermore, by adducing divine compassion, Williams says that God does not need to experience suffering in the same manner in order to identify with us.

⁴ One is reminded here of the statement made by Wittgenstein that 'The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man', in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (rev ed., London-New York: Routledge, 1974), 6.43.

⁵ Williams, 'The Asian Tsunami' (2 January 2005), available at <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/>, accessed 11/1/2014, n.p.

⁶ 'The number of deaths horrifies us - but what most painfully reaches our feelings is the individual face of loss and terror.'

⁷ "'Making sense" of a great disaster will always be a challenge simply because those who are closest to the cost are the ones least likely to accept some sort of intellectual explanation, however polished. Why should they? Every single random, accidental death is something that should upset a faith bound up with comfort and ready answers. Faced with the paralysing magnitude of a disaster like this, we naturally feel more deeply outraged - and also more deeply helpless. We can't see how this is going to be dealt with, we can't see how to make it better. We know, with a rather sick feeling, that we shall have to go on facing it and we can't make it go away or make ourselves feel good.'

⁸ 'If some religious genius did come up with an explanation of exactly why all these deaths made sense, would we feel happier or safer or more confident in God? Wouldn't we feel something of a chill at the prospect of a God who deliberately plans a programme that involves a certain level of casualties?'

a freely given gift; they have learned to be open to a calling or invitation from outside their own resources, a calling to accept God's mercy for themselves and make it real for others'. And furthermore, for those who are left, Williams endorses *compassion*, or what he calls 'passionate engagement' which seeks 'to change the situation in whatever – perhaps very small – ways that are open to us' and that finally what 'can be said with authority about these terrible matters can finally be said only by those closest to the cost. The rest of us need to listen; and then to work and – as best we can manage it – pray.' Over and above this, Williams asserts (in another piece written in remembrance of the Tsunami)¹ that 'love can continue to grow even on the soil of the worst pain and the deepest doubt. When we stretch and torment our minds over the problem of evil in the world, we should not forget that the survival of love is just as much of a mystery.' To say this, is to imply that while there is a 'problem of evil', there is also 'the problem of good' which bears witness to 'the bewildering mystery of the fact that the ruined landscape can still be made into a place of human dignity and hope.'

Looking at Williams' response to this tragedy, we can see that some of the themes we have articulating are present namely the reality of *contingency* (our susceptibility to natural disasters), *contemplation* or attentive practice (our awareness of the particular faces and individuals who suffer), *compassion* (the process of listening to victims, or what he calls 'passionate engagement'), and finally *non-closure* (refusing simple explanations or solutions to the problem of suffering). All these traits confirm the argument we have been making thus far, and gives some legs to Williams' own application of his more 'theoretical' work (in relation to his engagement with Adams' theodicy).

5.3. Tragedy, Time and Augustine

In this section, I will deal with some miscellaneous texts in which the theme of tragedy is brought explicitly in into contact with the theme of time and contingency. The purpose of this section is to make explicit that which has been presumed and argued throughout, namely that (for Williams) the possibility of the tragic is bound up with our existence as creatures living within the constraints of time and creaturely contingency. I shall focus mainly on two texts or more specifically certain sections of those texts in which the question of time and tragedy are explicitly brought into the discussion. The first text we shall deal with is an essay length review of the first edition of John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*. The second essay is one we have already discussed previously, namely his essay on Augustine and evil.² I earlier discussed Williams' reflections on the Augustinian theory of *privation boni*, but left out Williams' reflections on the tragic in this essay in order for it to be discussed later. The reason I did this was because I wanted to trace the specific contours of Williams' understanding of tragedy as it has lead up to the present day.

The context for Williams' reflections on the tragic in 'Saving Time: Thoughts, Patience and Vision'³, is his friendly critique of Milbank's reflections on the church in *Theology and Social Theory*. Williams'

¹ Williams, 'Tsunami 2004: A Service of Remembrance St Paul's Cathedral' (11 May 2005), available at <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/>, accessed 11/1/2014, n.p.

² Cf. chapter two above.

³ *New Blackfriars* 73.861 (1992), 319-326.

problem with Milbank's portrayal of the church is that – historically speaking – it tries to fuse 'historical narrative with 'essentialist', diagrammatic accounts of ideological options.'¹ Milbank's sketch of the church as a historical entity, in relation to Greco-Roman society and Judaism, risks becoming a metanarrative that is in danger of becoming 'a bald statement of timeless and ideal differences' and 'a narrative of origins' within an 'ahistorical framework', a 'battlefield of ideal types'.² In relation to Milbank's construal of the Christian vision as a rejection of ontological violence, and its concomitant commitment to the priority of non-violence, Williams again wonders whether Milbank overemphasises the 'achieved' character of the church's identity, without paying attention to the processes in which the church's identity is 'learned, negotiated, betrayed, inched forward, discerned and risked'.³ It is within this context that the theme of tragedy enters into the discussion. He mentions Milbank's obstinate refusal of 'the haunting of ethics by the tragic, to the extent this might suggest an inevitability, a non-contingency, about evil.'⁴ However Williams wonders whether 'the very ideas of culture, idiom and ethic insist on the tragic in some form. If our salvation is cultural (historical, linguistic, etc.), it is not a return to primordial harmonics, purely innocent difference. We are always already, in history, shaped by privation, living at the expense of each other: important moral choices entail the loss of certain specific goods for certain specific persons, because moral determination, like any 'cultural' determination, recognizes that not all goods for all persons are *contingently* compatible.' Therefore, he argues that 'The peace of the church is going to be vacuous or fictive if it is not historically aware of how it is *constructed* in the events of determination which involve conflict and exclusion of some kind.'⁵

He goes on to say, regarding 'the minimalist theodicy of Augustinianism', that 'an authentically contingent world is one in which you cannot guarantee the compatibility of goods. That's what it *is* to be created. And when that contingency becomes meshed with rational beings' self-subverting choices of unreality over truth, the connectedness of human community becomes life-threatening as well as life-nurturing. That is what it is to be fallen.' He goes on to say (echoing some thoughts we have seen elsewhere, namely in his poem 'Twelfth Night') that 'Grace does not give innocence...it gives absolution and the Church's peace is a healed history, not a 'total harmony' whose constructed (and thus scarred) character doesn't show. And in our history, healing is repeatedly imperilled and broken by new decisions.' In this context, he goes on to articulate that 'The Church actually articulated its gospel of peace by speaking the language of repentance; failure can be 'negotiated' into what is creative. But this means that the Church *as an historical community* is always in construction. It does not promise a new and finished innocence in the order of time, but focuses the freedom of God constantly to draw that order back to difference that is nourishing, not ruinous.'⁶

The question then arises here whether this understanding of the Church's existence within time implies 'a myth of necessary violence'. Williams' response to this is, firstly, that the word 'violence' has become a loaded word and that 'sometimes it is being made to do duty for any voluntary limiting

¹ Ibid., 319-320.

² Ibid., 320.

³ Ibid., 321.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 322

⁶ Ibid., 322.

of another's unrestricted will'.¹ He says that it ought to be possible to say that 'a contingent world is one in which contestation is inevitable, given that not all goods are 'compossible', without saying that there can be no healing or mending eschatologically, or that conflict and exclusion have a sacred or necessarily liberative character.'² Secondly, Williams seeks to relate the doctrine of the Trinity to the *creatio ex nihilo*. Williams argues that there is a difference within the Trinity which does not amount to 'collision or competition' and this 'difference' is seen to be basis for 'the positing of difference 'outside' the divine life'. However, regarding this divine creative act, such a positing is not 'a *repetition* of divine generation' but rather it is 'the making of a world whose good will take time to realise, whose good is to emerge from uncontrolled circumstance – not by divine enactment in the direct sense, but by a kind of interaction of divine and contingent causality'.³ For Williams 'Creation itself is not to be thought of as a moment of tragic rupture, a debauching of divine Wisdom, but is surely pregnant with the risk of tragedy, conflicting goods, if the good of what is made is necessarily bound up with taking time. The Fall is not necessary, logically or ontologically but...its story can be 'retrieved' as one outworking of what creation (logically) cannot but make possible if it is really *other* to God.'⁴

Thereafter, Williams concludes his essay with some reflections on the socio-political implications of *Theology and Social Theory*, and the lessons that can be learn from it. Since such a discussion is not explicitly relevant to our discussion, I will not enter into a discussion here of those passages. Rather, I will move onto the next essay on Augustine which deals with similar themes.

Towards the end of his essay on Augustine and evil, Williams seek to mount a response to the work of Kathleen Sands⁵ particularly as it relates to her criticisms of Augustine, namely, her rejection of the privation theory of evil as well as her privileging of a radically tragic view of life in which the Good and the True do not always find identity, and (further) that the twin options of dualism and rationalism are unable to deal with the fundamental contingency of life. Such an opinion rejects 'moral dualism' in the sense that (as she argues) to be involved in life means that one is often inherently involved in evil; furthermore, the traditional Augustinian position (according to Sands) is unable to deal with this radical contingency that haunts all our activity as human beings. She argues that the moral dualism that is pervasive in Christian ethical reflection is tied to a concept of the rationalistic will that is bound to a primarily androcentric mode of discourse. Taking these points into account, Williams partially confirms her opinion by saying that 'there is no timeless and stable goodness in this world; there is no incarnation of evil. All creaturely good is realised in *time*...' However, he distances himself from Sands by saying that 'the perfection exists not as something that issues from a process, but as the eternal standard and direction of creaturely good.'⁶

Williams wants to distinguish Augustine himself from any simplistic understanding of the Good that is separate from its entanglements with contingent realisation. Williams argues that it was precisely the Donatists and the Pelagians who argued for such an ahistorical position in relation to the Church.

¹ One should compare this comment with Gillian Rose's reflections on 'violence-in-love', in *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 147-152.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 322-323.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 323. One is reminded in this instance of our earlier discussion of Paul Tillich, in regard to his equation of 'creation' and 'the Fall'.

⁵ Kathleen M. Sands, *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

⁶ 'Insubstantial Evil'. 117-118.

If the Good is God (as Augustine argues) then such ahistorical understandings of the Church's identity will not work because the Good cannot be completely present within time in a non-dialectical manner because God cannot be reduced to and circumscribed by any finite actualisation. However, such a dialectical actualisation of the Good should not be (*contra* Sands) taken to mean that the Good ultimately is radically contingent, meaning different things in different contexts without any "grammar" of continuity¹ between these differing contexts. If there is not any such continuity then it is difficult to escape the kind of dualism that Sands wants to reject, and furthermore it becomes difficult to articulate a moral theory that argues that there are certain things that are wrong no matter what context we find ourselves in.

As can be seen from this, Williams is rejecting the radical implications of Sands' theory of tragedy, but this should by no means imply that Williams is rejecting a tragic perspective in general. He says that a true Augustinian might still say that 'the world *is* tragic, in the sense that our fallen perceptions of the world are so flawed that we are constantly, and inevitably (since the Fall), involved in mistaken and conflictual of our true interests. In so far as the Good, in the fallen order, requires a measure of coercion if total incoherence and fragmentation are to be avoided, *loss* is always bound up with creaturely virtue, even sanctity...However, this frustration is contingent on history, not intrinsic to the nature of their good. What such an interlocutor could not accept would be a definition of tragic conflict as a *necessary* feature of created order.'² And so, we can see that Williams is not rejecting a tragic perspective per se, but rather a conception of the tragic that is understood in terms of 'necessarily conflictual goods' which ultimately imply 'very stark metaphysical implications'.³ Williams is at pains to emphasise that to be involved in time implies that we can succumb to potential tragedy, but this should not imply that life should be understood as 'essentially' tragic. Instead, we should understand tragedy as that which is made possible by our involvement in creaturely *contingency* and a reality that is bounded by temporal limits.

To summarise my conclusions from examining these two later essays, I can reaffirm my basic contention that for Williams, tragedy is bound up with our involvement in time. In his interactions with Milbank and Sands, Williams is seeking to emphasise that tragedy is not part of the essential ontology of the world. To understand the tragic as bound up with the contingent reality of life is to clearly distinguish Williams understanding of tragedy from any affirmation of an ontology of violence (the critique of which has been expounded by people like John Milbank and David Bentley Hart). Understanding tragedy as a part of our existence as *contingent* beings is very different from affirming that life is fundamentally tragic, ontologically speaking. To live within time means that we are subject to powers and forces beyond our control, and that we are entwined with dynamics that might cause others to be subject to diminution and violence. We say this in an attempt to be as realistic as possible in relation to how the world really operates, without retreating into a world in which the reality of human suffering and pain are not taken with full seriousness.

¹ Ibid., 119.

² Ibid., 120.

³ Ibid.

5.4 Tragedy and the Broken Middle: After Hegel and Gillian Rose

It is beyond the scope of this section to expound Williams' entire socio-political philosophy; it will suffice here to say that Williams advocates a kind of 'interactive pluralism'¹ which tries to steer a way through both liberal individualism and strong versions of communitarianism. Williams' proposal is influenced by many sources², but the essential model underlying his politics is a theological one, namely the Pauline image of 'the body' in which each part is given its dignity and particularity, but that each part nonetheless contributes to the common good of the body.³ To use another analogy: in a symphonic performance each part, instrument and melody, is unique, but contributes something to the whole, something that is greater than the sum of its parts.⁴ He holds to a belief in the 'social miracle'⁵ of charity and the collective good that can arise when the legitimate needs, desires and identities of different communities are recognised, and are given space to articulate together a vision of society that will lead to the mutual benefit of all involved in this process. From this, it follows that Williams' ideal regarding the socio-political context is a more decentralized one, one that is less 'statist' or centred around a programme of 'programmatically secularism' in which the state and the realm of politics is assumed to arbitrate between different groups in abstraction from their particular cultural and religious identities. Such a process of abstraction is an inherently violent and coercive process since communities and individuals are asked, for the sake of political peace and order, to be culturally and religiously 'neutered', to be silenced regarding something that makes them who they are as individuals and communities. Instead, Williams argues for a 'procedural secularism' in which the state gives dignity and recognition to the different claims of various constituencies, while at the same time refusing to prefer one cultural or religious identity over another⁶, as can be seen in his controversial lecture on *Shari'a* law⁷, the content of which I will not enter into here.⁸

The problematic relationship between identity and difference within the socio-political realm, both philosophically and practically conceived, is the place where Hegel's vision becomes important for Williams.⁹ As we have already said earlier, Williams changed his view on Hegel somewhere in the late 1980's as a result of his engagement with Gillian Rose, and his student Andrew Shanks. Initially, Williams held to the standard criticism of Hegel, namely that he held to an understanding of all

¹ Williams, 'Religion, Diversity and Tolerance', in *Faith in the Public Square*, 81.

² They range from Russian Orthodox thoughts on personhood, religious political theorists like Lord Acton and J.N. Figgis, as well as philosophers like Charles Taylor, and of course Hegel, via Gillian Rose.

³ See Williams, 'Knowing Our Limits', in Rowan Williams and Larry Elliot (eds.), *Crisis and Recovery: Ethics, Economics and Justice* (UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 19-34.

⁴ I owe this imagery to Mike Higton, who uses it in his discussion of Williams' political theology. On this, see Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004), 112-134.

⁵ See *Lost Icons*, chapter 2.

⁶ On this, see the essays contained in part one of *Faith in the Public Square*, 11ff.

⁷ For the texts of this lecture, see 'Civil and Religious Law in England: A Religious Perspective'. *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 10.3 (2008), 262-282.

⁸ For a commentary on the content of this lecture, as well as some exposition and friendly criticism, see Samia Bano, 'In Pursuit of Religious and Legal Diversity: A Response to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the 'Sharia Debate' in Britain'. *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 10.3 (2008), 283-309; Jonathan Chaplin, 'Legal Monism and Religious Pluralism: Rowan Williams on Religion, Loyalty and Law'. *International Journal of Public Theology* 2 (2008) 418-441; Mike Higton, 'Rowan Williams and Sharia: Defending the Secular'. *International Journal of Public Theology* 2 (2008) 400-417; Mark D. Chapman, 'Rowan Williams's Political Theology: Multiculturalism and Interactive Pluralism'. *Journal of Anglican Studies* 9.1 (2011), 61-79; Frederiek Depoortere, 'Rowan Williams' *Shari'a* Lecture: Law, Love, and the Legacy of the Enlightenment'. *Political Theology* 13.4 (2012), 425-443.

⁹ I am indebted to Ben Myers discussion of these themes in *Christ the Stranger*, 52-58. For further reflections on this theme, see Matheson Russell, 'Dispossession and Negotiation: Rowan Williams on Hegel and Political Theology', in Matheson Russell (ed.), *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays*, 85-114.

difference being consumed in the sameness of the Absolute. Later, he changed his viewpoint and came to understand Hegel as a thinker of difference and negativity, rather than reconciliation and closure. In Williams' own words, Hegel's philosophy of mind is 'not a story of *return* to the same', and he doubts whether for Hegel 'the Absolute Spirit was realizable as the term of any specific historical process'. There is a teleological pattern within history but it is not 'representable' fully in a specific 'historical consciousness'.¹ Therefore, within the context of human negotiation and language, 'there is no identity *yet to be found* in the endless exchanges of speech and understanding.'² For Williams, in order to understand Hegel, one must understand that for him to *think* is to think within the context of 'an infinite relatedness' in which there is 'no concrete identity that is not 'mediated', i.e. realised and maintained by something other than itself alone.'³ This more or less summarises (in Williams' view) Hegel's understanding of 'negativity'; such 'negativity' finds a supreme example for Hegel in his (Lutheran) understanding of the divine incarnation whereby God, who is bound up with 'making sense' of things⁴, identifies with 'the poverty, pain and negativity of life and death' which cannot be construed as 'natural symbols of divine identity', so that the cross can be understood in a 'speculative' manner in which the 'negative' undermines sameness or simplistic identity, thereby questioning the violence of human totalization.⁵

In an article specifically dedicated to Gillian Rose⁶, Williams seeks to expound Hegel's thought within a specifically socio-political context. Rose within her political appropriation of Hegel sought to move beyond the two options of absolute identity (as in some interpretations of Hegel) and absolute difference (as in the postmodern ethical theory of someone like Levinas). Both options make otherness literally 'un-thinkable'. Instead Rose sought to emphasise the process of political labour and negotiation in which difference is 'an occasion of work, the work by which human beings constantly query what they have assumed is their interest as individuals or definite groups'⁷ in which we acknowledge that the 'sense I make is not under my control'⁸. However, such a process is precisely a *political* or 'agonistic'⁹ in which 'every moment of recognition is also a new moment is also a new moment of salutary error to the extent that it is the taking of a *position*'.¹⁰ Such a staking of a position is inherently risky since it becomes difficult to extract such a negotiating process from 'a struggle of the will against the resistance of an environment, and it becomes impossible to disentangle this from some account of violence'.¹¹ It is this context of aporia and political *agon* that Rose designates as 'the broken middle'. Williams goes on to define Rose's concept of 'the broken middle'¹² by saying that

¹ Williams, 'Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity' [1992], in *Wrestling with Angels*, 29.

² *Ibid.*, 32.

³ Williams, 'Logic and Spirit in Hegel' [1998], in *Wrestling with Angels*, 36.

⁴ 'Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity', 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32. The longer passage reads (*Ibid.*, 32.): 'the union of divine and human interest must be affirmed and understood at just that point where the sheer historical vulnerability of the human is most starkly shown, where unfinishedness, tension, the rejection of meaning and community are displayed in the figure of a man simultaneously denied voice and identity by the religious and political rationalities of his day. To understand the (historical) cross as God's is to understand the negative 'speculatively' – the negative not as absence or mystery but as the denial of human spirituality in oppression, suffering and death.'

⁶ Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose' [1995], in *Wrestling with Angels*, 53-76.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹² For a treatment of Gillian Rose that comes to similar conclusions, and emphasises its difference from the political project of Milbank's 'radical orthodoxy', see Clare Greer, 'The Problem of the Middle in Gillian Rose's Reading of Hegel: Political

'Without the awareness of what constrains us, which is not only the given material environment but the history of negotiation with other agents that surrounds our projects before they are articulated or formed, we cannot act so as to initiate or change; yet the act itself that changes or introduces the critical, the possibility of failure, requires that we stand over against the ethical as *order*, recognizing that the action we inaugurate is not in advance specified as successful, well-formed or orderly. It is involved with 'violence'. But, in turn, that violence is rendered recognizable, capable of being criticised, by the fact that the ethical is not abolished; the act of inauguration does not establish an anti-order of arbitrary free-for-all.'¹

It is not difficult to see here that for Williams and Rose, politics is a potentially *tragic* affair in which the staking of an identity and a position is always already engaged with relatedness and limitation and 'negativity', as well as failure and potential 'violence'. Staking a position within this context entwines one with *conflict* and the limited options made available by the contingent milieu we find ourselves in. Such a context has been made possible by an infinite range of determinants and historical effects, and our staking of a position within this environment can only continue this negotiating process within the confines of time, which means that such an 'ideological' positioning can never be finalized or closed off since such a position has been made possible by *contingent* factors which limit our perspectives on any totalized 'whole'. And because of this, our staking of a position always has the potential for *failure*, and can – potentially - even contribute (even unintentionally) to historical effects that can be deemed 'violent', in the sense that it creates 'limited' options for those who come after. As such, the reality of the tragic, *non-closure* and a continuing involvement within the process of negotiation remain important factors within our socio-political theorising and praxis. This does not mean that Williams holds tragedy to be the final word about humanity², nor that the 'social miracle' of human charity is not possible within the context of such political engagement. He is simply saying that we cannot ever come to a final conclusion regarding the political ordering of society - we have to go on attempting, to 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better' as Samuel Beckett said.³

Such a political vision applies to the context of the church and the body of Christ just as much as it applies to our everyday societal context. Especially when it comes to the problem of serious disagreement regarding moral issues, in which opinions can be so divisive, Williams suggests that as the body of Christ we have 'to sacrifice a straightforward confidence in our "purity"'. Being in the Body means that we are touched by one another's commitments and thus by one another's failures. If another Christian comes to a different conclusion and decides in different ways from myself, and if I can still recognize his or her discipline and practice as sufficiently like mine to sustain a conversation, this leaves my own decisions to some extent under question. I cannot have absolute certainty that this is the only imaginable reading of the tradition. I need to keep my reflections under critical review. This...is not a form of relativism. It is a recognition of the element of putting oneself at risk that is involved in any serious decision making or any serious exercise of discernment.'⁴ The particular moral

Consequences for the Theology of John Milbank', in Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler (eds.), *After the Postmodern and the Postsecular: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion* (UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 189-208.

¹ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

² Cf. 'The Spirit of the Age to Come', 622.

³ Samuel Beckett, 'Worstward Ho', in *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho* (London, John Calder, 1989), 101.

⁴ Williams, 'On Making Moral Decisions'. *Anglican Theological Review* 81.2 (1999), 304.

problem Williams references in the above quoted essay is the problem of nuclear armament (something, like his teacher MacKinnon, he stands strongly against¹), but it could also be applied to the strenuous debates within the Anglican Communion surrounding woman bishops and homosexuality. The manifest ‘brokenness’ within the body of Christ surrounding these issues is something which has to be taken seriously, but the ecumenical desire for unity is something that cannot be sacrificed or given up without serious diminution of the witness of the Church, even though such a desire cannot be achieved at any cost (‘Unity at all costs is indeed not a Christian goal. Our unity is Christ-shaped or it is empty’).² And so within our ecclesial and social context, we continue to inhabit ‘the broken middle’, which while frustrating and sometimes even irresolvable, is the only place in which dialogue can continue, and transformation of struggles can occur.

5.5. Christology and Temporality: Christ and Prince Myshkin

In this section I want to engage very briefly with one of Williams’ more recent texts, namely his book on Dostoevsky and his discussion on whether Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* can really be called a Christ figure. Herein, Williams references the temporal aspect of salvation, and how Christology relates to that reality, which often involves an entanglement in tragic decisions, effects, and outcomes. The debate surrounding the question on how far Myshkin can really be considered a Christ figure continues to be debated among scholars of Dostoevsky. As Williams says, ‘discussion continues about how far the Prince’s failure as a protagonist should be read theologically, as a statement about—once again—Christ’s relation to mundane worldly truth or the effectiveness of grace in the actual world of human relationships or Dostoevsky’s capacity to sustain his surface Christian conviction in the actual process of writing.’ But Williams suggests that ‘What we are seeing in the novel, certainly, is not the outworking of a theological strategy but the effect that the writing itself has upon the original purposes of the writer.’³

It is Williams’ argument that the reason it is difficult to consider Myshkin a ‘saviour’ is not because he is a human being subject to the fluctuations of time, but rather for precisely the opposite reason, namely that it is Myshkin’s ‘changelessness’⁴ that makes it difficult for him to be considered a saviour. Williams goes further to say that ‘if this is a Christ figure, it is one who has no “hinterland,” no God behind him.’⁵ He describes a scene in the novel where Myshkin has an epileptic fit; Williams takes note of this because ‘The ecstatic vision is of a state beyond time and so beyond choice and action’, and furthermore, the language used by Myshkin to describe his experience seems to speak of ‘[a] world of causal completeness, where we have no option but “reconciliation”’. That is, we have to learn to accept the way things are, accepting that ‘this world is a terrible, mechanical thing’.⁶ Myshkin

¹ For more on this, see Williams, ‘The Ethics of SDI’ in Richard J. Bauckham and R. John Elford (eds.), *The Nuclear Weapons Debate: Theological and Ethical Issues* (London: SCM, 1989), 162-174; Williams, ‘Barth, War and the State’, in *Wrestling with Angels*, 150-170. For the wider context of these debates which occupied Williams during the 80’s, you can also read Williams, *The Truce of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983) and Rowan Williams and Mark Collier, *Peacemaking Theology: A Study Book for Individuals and Groups*. Beginning Now I (London: Dunamis, 1984).

² ‘On Making Moral Decisions’. 307.

³ Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction*, 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

seems to be a 'timeless' figure, without a past or 'hinterland, and because of this, such a timeless quality has 'no resources of memory and critical self-awareness to make it effective in the world of human relations'. Williams mentions Myshkin's relationship with one of the other female characters in the novel, and suggests that there is little personal investment or genuine listening to the 'actuality' of the person's situation.¹ He says that 'To see the truth in someone is not only to penetrate behind appearances to some hidden static reality. It also has to be, if it is not to be destructive, a grasp of the processes and motors of concealment, a listening to the specific language of a person hiding himself. It is perhaps the difference between "seeing through" someone and understanding him.'² Because of this, it is difficult to depict Myshkin as a 'beautiful' character since it is difficult to represent such a character 'without giving him a history that will enable him to understand the changes and processes of growth or repression or whatever that occur in temporal beings. Myshkin's timelessness is what prevents him being a savior.'³ The 'humanness' of Myshkin is put in question by this reality because 'what is most crucially human—growth, memory, the capacity to listen and *change* place' cannot be done 'if you don't have a place to begin with.'⁴ In brief: Myshkin fails as a Christ-figure because he has never 'learned how to learn'.⁵

Thereafter, Williams goes on to discuss how 'Myshkin's tragedy sheds a clear light on the whole of Dostoevsky's implicit Christology.' Referencing the debate within Christian circles as to whether Christ in the incarnation took on fallen or unfallen nature, Williams writes that 'If the Word takes on a fallen humanity, does this mean that he is born into a humanity that is—in Augustine's language—incapable of not sinning? In which case, how can he restore it? But if the Word takes on unfallen humanity, in what sense does he undergo precisely the experience of fallen beings faced with potentially tragic choices? If he does not, once again, how can he restore it, healing all that he has assumed, in the vocabulary of the fourth-century Gregory Nazianzen?'⁶ However, with the figure of Myshkin, we see Dostoevsky's experimental and nostalgic attempt at a kind of utopic Christology which tries 'to remove any tragic shadow from the person of the saint or redeemer.'⁷ In contrast, referencing the biblical story of Christ, Williams says that Jesus is 'not one from which tension and decision are absent, and furthermore, in more detail (echoing no doubt some of the sentiments of his teacher MacKinnon), he says for

'Jesus to be human at all, this narrative implies, is for him to be faced with choices not simply between good and evil but between options that *might* arguably be good but also bring with them incalculable costs. The options that confront actual historical agents are not like self-contained items on a shelf or rack awaiting buyers; they are part of a continuum of human policies that may be flawed and damaging, and they will already be constrained by what has happened. This is the concrete meaning of embracing the consequences of fallenness. Even a subject whose desires are creative and altruistic has to enact those desires in a context

¹ Ibid., 50-51.

² Ibid., 51.

³ Ibid., 52.

⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁷ Ibid.

where their objects will often appear obscure and ambiguous, so that good outcomes cannot be tightly and causally linked to good intentions.¹

And because of this, the story of Jesus is bound to be 'a narrative of real risk: either a yes or a no could produce destructive results.'² To illustrate this point (moving away from the text itself), one only has to think here of Donald MacKinnon's oft-quoted reference to the cross being a tragic occurrence since it is simultaneously an event of salvation and damnation (for Judas Iscariot), and furthermore (because of its historical players, including Jews and the Romans) it is an event that has been used to justify centuries of Christian anti-Judaism, anti-Semitism, pogroms, and definitely made something like Auschwitz a greater possibility than it would have been without it. What seems clear from this discussion concerning Christology, and from Williams' more recent publications, is that even in his more recent theological endeavours, he still sensitive to the problems of temporality and its tragic possibilities. In Williams' opinion, not even God's redemptive act in Christ can be immunized against the vicissitudes that time involves. As we have already seen, in his reflections on T.S. Eliot and the *Four Quartets*, Williams believes that it is only through taking time seriously (something the incarnation does) that we are able to speak about genuine redemption and hope. For Williams, Christology and the question of salvation cannot be extricated from the problem of time, if it is precisely *we* (as temporal and contingent beings subject to the limitations and tragedies of created being) who need redemption, then the question is how are we are to be redeemed, without changing us into something else, or removing something that is central to our humanity, namely our material and temporal quality as limited, non-divine creatures.

Bringing this part of the chapter to a close, other shorter texts could be mentioned³, but enough has been said to make the point. Thus far we have shown that, for Williams, tragedy provides an exemplary example of that which resists *closure* because it resists attempts to circumscribe and to explain. The particular force of tragedy is that it continues to confront us with the inherent *difficulty* of explaining the world within generalised theories because the tragic refuses to be generalised in such a fashion. In addition to this, we showed that Williams distances himself from theodicy projects precisely because they are unable to deal with the *particular* experiences of suffering, with the unique first-person perspective of the sufferer. And finally, we showed once again that, for Williams, tragedy is bound with our existence as contingent beings, subject to the forces of time, and it is within this context that we are to understand the radical contingency and conflict that afflict our political endeavours (as Williams has learned from Hegel and Gillian Rose). And furthermore, since our humanity is bound up with the time and contingency, our understanding of Christology and atonement will have to take account of this factuality.

¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

² *Ibid.*

³ One could mention Williams brief reflections on tragedy in the work of Charles Dickens, which touches on some of the themes discussed thus far, namely in relation to the themes of self-deception, and the tragic consequences that can erupt when the truth is confronted. For this, see Williams, 'Address at The Wreathlaying Ceremony to Mark the Bicentenary of the Birth of Charles Dickens, Westminster Abbey, 7 February 2012'. *Dickens Quarterly* 29.2 (2012), 113-115.

5.6. On the Trinity and Tragedy

The subject of this section will be Williams' understanding of the Trinity and its relation to time. Here I would like to anticipate a possible objection to the argument that I have been making regarding the relationship between tragedy and time, and it seems that now (after we have engaged Williams' perspective on time and tragedy in more depth) that such a section seems to be well-placed in this chapter, particularly since it picks on themes we have been discussing in this chapter, namely the Trinity (briefly discussed in relation to Williams' discussion of MacKinnon) and the problem of contingency. This is an section designed to counter a potential interpretation of Williams' understanding of tragedy, and its relation to his doctrine of the Trinity. More specifically, this part is a kind of propaedeutic against a possible misinterpretation of Williams' understanding of the relation of the Trinity to the dramatic movements of time. My argument is not essentially addressed against specific critiques of Williams' Trinitarian theology (there are no significant critiques of his theology of Trinity that I know of) but rather against a *possible* interpretation. Such an interpretation could run as follows: if we take a look at some of Williams' discussions of the Trinity, we could find the ontological basis for tragedy *not* within creaturely contingency but rather in the divine life itself, in which the divine life is itself understood as a kind of tragedy (like the divine tragedy advanced by the 'Orthodox' philosopher and mystagogue Nicholas Berdyaev, a thinker who Williams is not particularly fond of).¹ At face value, such an interpretation seems to be a stretch, to say the least. However, it is one *possible* interpretation of Williams' Trinitarian reflections, particularly in relation to his reflections on the desire of God, a lack of 'fulfilment' and 'completion'², even *between* the Triune persons themselves. The reason I bring up this discussion at all is because of a statement made by Ben Myers, in his book on Williams. While expounding Williams' theology regarding fantasy, he writes that 'Even the life of God resists gratification. The Son eternally unconsolated, 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* [*italics mine*].'³

Now it could be argued that if we take such a passage literally (I don't think this is Myers's real intention, as I will argue), then – theologically speaking - the door is open to placing tragedy at the heart of existence, and that the basis for tragedy (ontologically speaking) is found within the Godhead itself, rather than time and creaturely contingency. Tragedy would be seen as an expression of

¹ In his interview with Breyfogle ('Time and Transformation', 308), Williams has expressed his dislike of Berdyaev: 'I loved Berdyaev when I was seventeen and haven't been able to read him seriously since. He has the same effect on me as Tillich, I'm afraid to say. That is, it's all very exciting, but I haven't a clue what you're supposed to *do* about it. I suspect that with both Tillich and Berdyaev you're dealing with people — I have to state this carefully — who are essentially rhetoricians, so much involved in the process of the rhetoric that other dimensions of the discourse just seem to fade away. That is to say, the *experience* of reading them is what the text is about; I'm afraid there's an emptiness behind it. It's a pity that for many people Berdyaev represents the Russian Orthodox mindset, and most Russians tear their hair out at that suggestion.'

² I am aware that using terms such as these are problematic since it might seem to imply a denial of divine simplicity, or a kind of process theology. However, it should be said that these terms are being used analogously in reference to the *intra-Trinitarian* relations, and not in relation to God's dependency on the world. The reason I adopt such language is because speaking of 'desire' between the Triune persons implies an 'eternal dynamism' that never comes to an end or rest. I am grateful for Sarah Rowland-Jones' critical comments on an earlier draft of this section.

³ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 112.

ontology, and thereby 'necessary' in the stringent sense of the word. My argument thus far has been that Williams understands tragedy to have a foundation within created time, not divine eternity. My basic response to this potential interpretation will go as follows: in Williams' theology of the Trinity (1) the language of divine desire implies a lack of closure or rest *between* the Trinitarian persons, but this does not imply an 'eternal tragedy' *within* the Trinity. Further, (2) we can only apply the category of *creaturely finitude* to the divine life in an *analogical* sense in light of God's own eternal self-differentiation from the Son, revealed in the incarnation, whereby 'God constitutes in Jesus a life which is – so to speak – paradigmatically *creaturely*, distanced from God of...something approaching the 'externality' of creator and creation, yet decisively not that, but a mutually constitutive presence, and internal relation of terms'.¹ And if this is the case, then (3) we can comprehend Donald Mackinnon's application of the *analogy of limits* to the divine life, and Williams' apparent endorsement of it. The language of 'limits' here is no doubt an exercise in analogous thinking, but it 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.

In making this argument, I am not implying that Myers advocates an 'eternal tragedy' in the sense that I have been arguing against, only that it is a possible trajectory of what he has said. In what is to follow, I shall deal a little with Myer's quotation within its context. I will show that Myers' language of tragedy in relation to the Trinity is largely drawn from one lecture Williams delivered on the theology of the Russian Orthodox theologian, Sergei Bulgakov. However, even within this text, we can see that there are indications that we should not take such language too seriously or literally. Such a move would go beyond Williams' own explicit statements to the contrary. But in order to contextually place this statement of Myers, I will need to embark on a discussion of William's understanding of divine desire and the Trinity² so that the context can be properly indicated.

As we have already shown in our previous chapter on the problem of fantasy, Williams' theology of desire remains fundamentally Augustinian in its approach to this question.³ The first major reflections on this theme (within Williams' oeuvre) focus for the most part on the theme of human desire, but already in these texts we can see that Williams' theology of desire is underpinned by a specific doctrine of God. A paradigmatic example can be found in his essay on Augustine, language and desire, penned in 1986, but published in 1989.⁴ Williams is reflecting here on Augustine's use of *signum* (sign) and *res* (the thing itself), as well Augustine's distinction between *frui* (enjoyment) and *uti* (use). As we have already mentioned in our previous chapter, Williams interprets Augustine's use of

¹ Williams, 'Trinity and Ontology', 158.

² It should be said here that, up the present date, whenever Williams engages in longer treatments of the Trinity, he almost always does so by exegeting specific texts within the Christian tradition, sometimes focusing in-length on one specific text or writer. There are exceptions, for instance in his reflections on icons, but by and large this is his practice. As of yet, we are still awaiting Williams' own book-length treatment of this theme, so the only texts (by and large) we have available for a positive construction of Williams' own Trinitarian theology are the texts in which he is expounding at the length the Trinitarian theology of other theologians. This confirms a perennial practice of Williams when it comes to his own theological construction, namely that he is not particularly 'original' in his treatment of theological topics, but that he is rather deeply hermeneutical thinker who loves immersing himself in the texts of others. But it should also give us pause when it comes to identifying Williams' own position completely with the opinion of the authors he is expounding. This is something we need to bear in mind as we look at some of his texts related to the doctrine of the Trinity. Regarding his own book length treatment of this theme, he has stated, in his interview with David Cunningham ('Living the Questions', 26), published in 2002, that he has already been 'trying for many years to write a book on the Trinity'. In private conversation, Graham Ward (a close friend of Williams) has confirmed that this project is still in progress.

³ I am indebted to Ben Myers discussion of this theme in *Christ the Stranger*, 83-91.

⁴ Williams, 'Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine's *De Doctrina*', 138-150.

these words to expound of a specific theology of desire. For Augustine (according to Williams) only God can be truly 'enjoyed' for God's own sake; all other things should be 'used' for the higher purpose of entering deeper into the life of the triune God. However, this does not imply that these things are merely disposable or that they can be commandeered for ideological pretensions (in the name of God). Instead, by saying that created things point us towards God, and therefore should not be enjoyed for themselves, we can affirm the hard truth that there is no end to our desire so that our desire cannot be exhausted by any object on the creaturely plane of reality. Such an acknowledgement preserves the 'objectivity' of the world over against the ego which would try to consume it in the hope of coming to an 'end' of desire.¹ It is precisely this deferral of desire which is the basis for Williams' reflections on the Trinity.

Williams' theology of desire is brought into explicit conversation with the doctrine of the Trinity in his celebrated (albeit highly controversial) essay on 'The Body's Grace', delivered in 1989.² I will not engage in depth here on the themes dealt with in this essay since they would take us too far from our present purpose. It can be said that the primary thrust of this essay is to expound a theology of desire and sexuality that opens us to the 'grace' of the embodied self, the other, human and divine, rather than treating the other as merely an theatre onto which we can stage our fantasies. This implies an understanding of sexuality that affirms joy and desire, but also risk and vulnerability in our intimate engagements.³ Here Williams explicitly relates the Trinity and desire⁴ since for Williams, the story of redemption implies that we are taken up into the desire that makes up the life of the Trinity, the love of Father, Son and Spirit. Nonetheless, despite the connections made here, we will have to wait several years before Williams engages in a more in-depth treatment of divine desire and the Trinity. The underlying structure is presupposed, but it is only made explicit in more depth several years later.

Before we analyse the rest of the texts, for the sake of orientation, one could summarise Williams' theology of the Trinity by saying that he is attempting to expound an *ek-static* Trinitarian doctrine, namely, that the persons of the Trinity are to be understood as a movement of *other*-directed love in which each person gives itself to the other, divests its being for the sake of the other: the Father gives himself to the Son and the Son to the Father. However, mere twoness risks becoming another kind of egoism (*égoïsme à deux*), so within the Trinity, the excess of love between the Father and Son is understood to be the Spirit. In the words of Ben Meyers: 'The Spirit sustains the exchange of love

¹ For more on this, see Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement*, 171-214

² Williams, 'The Body's Grace' [1989], in Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. (ed.), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 309-321.

³ For more reflections on the theme of sexuality, in relation to the question of ethics, see Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, 138-144; Williams, 'Forbidden Fruit: New Testament Sexual Ethics', in Martyn Percy (ed.), *Intimate Affairs: Spirituality and Sexuality in Perspective* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997), 21-31. For a discussion of these texts, see Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, 135-152. Also cf. Williams, 'Macrina's Deathbed Revisited', 244: 'Sexual desire, *erōs* in the usual sense, is, like other features of our instinctual life, capable of carrying reasonable meaning, and is analogous to that fundamental *erōs* for the endless God that binds the polyphony of our intentionality into some sort of unity'. For a critical discussion of Williams' reflection on this theme, see Andrew Cameron, 'Desire and Grace: Rowan Williams and the Search for Bodily Wholeness', *ON Rowan Williams: Critical Essays*, 141-162. For a more theologically constructive and nuanced treatment, see Christopher Craig Brittain, 'On the Demonisation and Fetishisation of Choice in Christian Sexual Ethics', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 27.2 (2014), 144-166.

⁴ 'Grace, for the Christian believer, is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant and wanted'. He goes on: 'The whole of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desire us, *as if we were God*, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the Trinity. We are created so that we may be caught up in this, so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by the learning that God loves us as God loves God.' For this quote, see 'The Body's Grace', 311-312.

between the Father and Son precisely being *more* than that exchange, by personifying their mutual excess in love.¹ In this context of infinite self-abnegation and love, desire can never be completed or terminated in the Other but rather continues to be deflected, so that we could say that there is *incompleteness* of desire within the Godhead itself which cannot be terminated because it is deflected in a perennial movement and 'excess' of perichoretic love. To quote Williams himself: 'A doctrine like that of the Trinity tells us 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.'²

One of Williams' earliest sustained reflections on the Trinity is his essay 'Barth on the Triune God' published in 1979, which was the product of series of intensive seminars on the Barth's theology.³ It would be difficult to summarise everything Williams has to say in this rather dense essay but for our purposes, it is important to take note of the fact that already here Williams has problems with any doctrine of the Trinity that reduces the Godhead to a quasi-monadistic subject, God existing as 'an Absolute' apart from the Trinitarian relations of self-bestowal and perichoresis.⁴ For Williams, Barth's construal of the divine 'modes of being' manifesting One subject (exemplified in Barth's earlier volumes of the dogmatics⁵) remains in strong tension with Barth's later reflections on Christology⁶, which imply a strongly 'historicized'⁷ understanding of God's Triune identity. Barth's theology of

¹ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 86. Williams seems to be influenced here by Milbank's discussion of the Spirit in 'The Second Difference'.⁷

² Williams, 'Author's Introduction', in *Wrestling with Angels*, xiii. It would take us too far in a different direction to examine the roots of Williams emphasis on this *ek-static* quality of the divine persons, but we could say (in a similar manner to the theme of desire), Williams begins by examining the question within the creaturely sphere (from a chronological perspective in relation to his total oeuvre) before moving onto discussing the Trinity (which is the subject of his more mature reflections). Obviously a doctrine of the Trinity is presupposed in his anthropology, but it seems that he began his earlier studies with the questions of human sociality before eventually moving onto the Trinitarian theology in more depth (especially in his engagement with Barth and Balthasar which we will discuss later). This can be seen from early on his career in discussions on personhood and sociality within an Eastern Orthodox context (see Williams, 'The Theology of Personhood: A Study of the Thought of Christos Yannaras', (1972), 415-430. For more, cf. Todd Breyfogle, 'Time and Transformation: A Conversation with Rowan Williams.' *Cross Currents* 45.3 (1995), 307-308), particularly in relation to the work of Vladimir Lossky, whose anthropology of *imago dei* sought to expound humanity as *imago trinitatis* (Cf. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 104 and *passim*). Like his Augustinian reflections on desire, Williams begins with reflecting on humanity before moving onto the divine life which presupposes such an *imago dei*. Human self-transcendence in the other presupposes a doctrine of God, which in turn implies the *ek-static* nature of the divine life. Such an understanding of God is the presupposition for Orthodox reflections on the difference between taking about 'the individual' and 'the person'. Human sociality, eros and language are to be understood as ontologically founded in the divine life of God in which by 'abandoning the myth of self-protected self-sufficiency, the conscious and intelligent agent, the finite nous, moves in the mode for which it was created, moves in alignment with the purpose of God, habitually echoing in finite for the infinite desire of God for God, of love for love' (in Williams, 'Nature, Passion and Desire: Maximus' Ontology of Excess', in Markus Vincent (ed.), *Studia Patristica* 68 (Leuven-Paris-Walpole: Peeters, 2013), 267).

³ 'Barth on the Triune God' [1979], in *Wrestling with Angels*, 106-145.

⁴ For the following reflections, I am indebted to Ben Myers discussion of this essay in 'Election, Trinity, and the History of Jesus: Reading Barth with Rowan Williams', in Myk Habets and Phillip Tolliday (eds.), *Trinitarian Theology After Barth* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 121-137. It might be interesting here to compare of some of the work that has been done in German Barthian scholarship, particularly that brand research associated with the figures of the so-called 'Münich school' of Barth interpretation that was initiated by figures such as Trutz Rendtorff. For more on this, see Trutz Rendtorff, 'Radikale Autonomie Gottes: Ein Verständnis der Theologie Karl Barths und ihrer Folge', in *Theorie des Christentums: Historisch-Theologische Studien zu einer Neuzeitlichen Verfassung* (Gütersloher Verlaghaus Gerd Mohn: Gütersloh, 1972), 161-181. For a discussion of Barth's doctrine of the Trinity, a classic text is Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Webster (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

⁵ On this, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (London-New York, T & T Clark, 1975), 348ff.

⁶ Particularly, CD 4.1ff where Barth's mature reflections on Christology imply a revision of his theology of the Trinity.

⁷ For more on Barth's historicized Christology, see Bruce McCormack, 'Karl Barth's Historicized Christology: Just How Chalcedonian is It?', in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 201-233. It should be said that Barth's relation to the importance of 'history' for theology is ambiguous, since his later reflections on Christology complicate his earlier anti-historicist tendencies during the earlier *Römerbrief* period. Barth was by no means unique in this tendency, since there were many other Weimar theologians and scholars who exhibited similar tendencies in response the outbreak of the First World War, such that some (like Friedrich-Wilhelm Graf) spoke of an 'anti-historical revolution' in Germany. Such a revolution took on many forms and cannot be easily categorized, even if one can speak of a general 'conservative revolution' (exemplified by Carl Schmitt) during this period. For more on this, see Georg Pfeleiderer, *Karl Barths Praktische Theologie: Zu Genese und Kontext*

revelation implied an epistemologically linear understanding whereby the movement of God's self-unveiling can only move in one direction, namely across the gnoseological abyss of creator towards creature.¹ Such a model implies a strongly 'monist' understanding of the Trinity, entwined within the dialectic of the master-slave relationship. In contrast, Barth's later reflections imply a more historical, pluralist, and relational understanding of the Trinity, one less focused on epistemology and more on soteriology, an understanding that is able to take into account not merely punctiliar events of revelation, but also the revelational process in which we learn what our language means within the context of our continuing relationship with God, as well as in the movements of history.² Such a process implies less certainty in our theological judgements about God and revelation, and instead proposes that we focus on becoming conformed to the pattern of Christ within a dialogical structure, rather than a unidirectional movement of divine self-disclosure. By doing this, however, it becomes clear that Williams is taking 'Barth' beyond Barth (in a distinctly Balthasarian direction), but nonetheless we can see that Williams' theology of the Trinity already at this juncture is concerned with undermining a 'monistic' conception of the Godhead which by bypasses plurality, and merely projects the solitary ego onto divine being. Williams does not discuss the theme of divine desire in this essay, but we have seen that already here in the late 1970's Williams is dissatisfied with any understanding of the Trinity which reaffirms an egocentric concept of God.

We can see this critique against a monistic conception of Trinity return in his reflections on Augustine's reflections on the self and the Trinity. In his essay 'Sapientia and the Trinity'³, Williams attempts to deconstruct a common assumption among theologians, namely that Western (Augustinian) theologies of the Trinity sought to emphasise the unity of the Trinity, while Orthodox thinkers sought to expound the plurality of persons.⁴ For Williams, Augustine's own reflections on this matter complicate such a neat division. Furthermore, he seeks to distance Augustine from any proto-

eines paradigmatischen Entwurfs systematischer im 20. Jahrhunderts. Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 115 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 29-47. It should also be mentioned that after the period of *Der Römerbrief*, some have even spoke of Barth's 'gnosticism'. For more on this, see Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination Between the World Wars* (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 27-36.

¹ Here, Williams is very much influenced by the writings of the Scandinavian theologian Gustav Wingren, who critiqued Barth for over-emphasising epistemology, in the sense that for Barth, revelation is mainly concerned about correct 'knowledge' about God. It should be said here that this interpretation of Barth has been subject to criticism. On this, see John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). However, Webster is aware of Williams' more nuanced critique of Barth in this essay (cf. *Ibid.*, 25), and seems to accept (at least partially) the validity of his concerns. However, for more critical discussions of Barth's theology of divine subjectivity, which argue that Barth's theology of the Trinity makes it difficult to account for the real *otherness* and *historicity* of creation, see Jörg Dierken, *Glaube und Lehre im modernen Protestantismus: Studien zum Verhältnis von religiösem Vollzug und theologischer Bestimmtheit bei Barth und Bultmann sowie Hegel und Schleiermacher.* Beiträge zur Historischen Theologie 92 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 49-76; Michael Menke-Peitzmeyer, *Subjektivität und Selbstinterpretation des dreifaltigen Gottes: Eine Studie zur Genese und Explikation des Paradigmas >>Selbstoffenbarung Gottes<< in der Theologie Karl Barths.* Münsterische Beiträge zur Theologie 60 (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2002), 531-547. In addition to this point, Menke-Peitzmeyer argues that Barth's theology of divine election is influenced by a philosophy of 'decisionism' (*Decizionismus*) that struggles to show how God's self-determination is already an expression of God's essence, and furthermore that it has difficulties with articulating an orthodox notion of the relation of the relation between grace and nature, thereby leading to a kind of 'positivism of revelation' ('*Offenbarungspositivismus*'). To read more about Barth's relation to the philosophy of 'decisionism', one can read Jan Rohls, *Philosophie und Theologie in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 535-540. For a more general treatment of divine subjectivity in Barth, you can also see Ingrid Spieckermann, *Gotteserkenntnis: Ein Beitrag zur Grundfrage der neuen Theologie Karl Barths* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1985), 72-82.

² Such an understanding of revelation is advanced further in some of Williams' other essays, namely 'Word and Spirit' [1980], and 'Trinity and Revelation' [1986] in *On Christian Theology*, 107-127, 131-147.

³ Williams, 'Sapientia and the Trinity: Reflections on *De Trinitate*', 317-332.

⁴ This theory was first expounded by Théodore de Régnon (1831-1893). For more on this, see David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 168-175.

Cartesianism in regard to the human self.¹ The image of God in man reflects 'a movement in our own createdness', a journey towards justice and wisdom, that reflects in turn 'our movement into God's own life as turned 'outwards''.² The 'introspective method' of *De trinitate* cannot be held responsible for the move towards individualism or the Cartesian emphasis on the solitary ego. Rather, Augustine seeks to 'demythologise' such an individualistic psychology by 'establishing the life of the mind firmly in relation to God'.³ Williams later confirms this opinion of Augustine in another essay when he says that the image of God who not be located in 'the mind' *per se* but rather in 'the mind of saint', the one who practices justice and love.⁴

This trajectory within Williams is carried further when we come to his reflections on Thomas Aquinas. Commenting on a lecture he delivered on the topic of Aquinas and the Trinity, Williams remarks that 'the whole of Aquinas' discussion of the Trinity takes off from the springboard of his immediately preceding discussion of whether God enjoys himself. That's a strange way of putting it, but he has been discussing the bliss of God, and by establishing that to make any sense of the biblical God you've got to think of a God who is not only loving and intelligent, but who is wholly in love with his own loving and intelligence, because its supremely delightful and wonderful reality that can be conceived.'⁵ In the lecture, Williams' purpose was to show that Aquinas' theology of the Trinity does not presuppose a separation of the God of creation (the one God) from his understanding of the God of salvation and redemption (the Triune God). As in his discussion of Augustine, he argues that Aquinas' anthropology of redeemed humanity concerns the question of how 'the rationale of being human is somehow rooted in the nature of loving and joyful consciousness which is God. And to be in God's image, to be God's conscious creature means to be bound up in that bliss.'⁶ For Aquinas, as Williams argues in the lecture, movement towards the Other within the immanent Trinity⁷ cannot be understood literally as a movement 'outwards' or a 'procession' in the same sense that creation is an outward movement. Nonetheless, Aquinas' way of dealing with the internal processions of the Godhead is to understand God as intelligent ('that God is in some graspable way conscious')⁸. And it is precisely this movement of intellection that counts as 'a *movement*, a process; something of which we can say there is an origin and an outcome.'⁹ Yet this movement implies no physical change; all it implies is that the object of intellection comes to 'inhabit' us in some way. In reference to our own human processes of intellection, Williams writes that our 'own acts of understanding involve what we know coming to be in us: they 'live' in us in the sense that their action upon our receptive sensibility and open mind becomes the action of the mind itself. To understand something is to have the action of our mind follow the contours, as you might say, of the active reality of what's understood.'¹⁰ To put it more simply, 'understanding something is the process of something's appearing in language. To

¹ 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*), 320.

² *Ibid.*, 321.

³ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁴ Williams, 'The Paradoxes of Self-knowledge in *De trinitate*', 131.

⁵ Shortt, *God's Advocates*, 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁷ Williams, 'What does Love Know? St. Thomas on the Trinity. *New Blackfriars* 82.964 (2001), 261-262. Aquinas' is seeking to expound the principle of John. 8.42, namely the Son 'comes forth' from the Father.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 261-262.

have the means of thinking about something is to 'speak' about it, not necessarily in audible words, but to let it become a moment in the system of speech in which we are aware of ourselves.'¹ In Aquinas' parlance, divine intellection is grounded in God's existence as *verbum*, the Word of God, generated out of God's act of 'speaking'. However, like we have seen in his discussion of Augustine, Williams shows that Aquinas' construal of the Trinity should not be reduced to the so-called 'Latin' interpretation, namely, 'the Trinity is a single subject reflecting itself to itself'². Instead, what Aquinas seems to be saying is that '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... 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.'³

Williams invokes the analogy of the Moebius strip (an image he invokes elsewhere⁴) 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).'⁵ Here we can see again Williams' argument that we 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. He writes that 'intellectual procession results in a sort of repetition in another medium of the known. But the relation of love or will does not produce an image; it produces an *inclinatio*, almost a 'programme' for action that is not a repetition of the act of the object, yet is no less a kind of living of the object in the subject, a presence of the beloved in the lover. Something known continues its structured activity in the knower by living in the knower as an intelligible structure. Something loved continues its life in the lover as a stimulus to motion away from itself, a stimulus to a kind of self-abandonment.' He summarises by saying that 'knowledge is about the continuity between subject and object, love is about the discontinuity. Knowing is the other coming to be in the subject, love is the acknowledgment that the other remains other, even in the subject.'⁶ He goes on to say, bringing such perspective into play with Aquinas' pneumatology 'God loves God, loves what is understood in the eternal Word, loves the always pre-existing self-giving of the Father. 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.' He explicates this suggestion further by saying that 'God is a movement towards God, God's wanting of God so that God may be fully and blissfully God, may enjoy the 'natural good' proper to divine nature. Insofar as the most fundamental thing we can give to each other, give in the sense of pure gratuity, is the unqualified wanting of another's good, and insofar as love is the ground of such wanting, then the Spirit is as rightly called 'gift' as 'love'...The natural good of the divine life is, it seems, something like the state of wanting another's good. If we could

¹ Ibid., 262.

² Ibid., 263.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Williams, 'Balthasar and Difference', in *Wrestling with Angels*, 83.

⁵ 'What Does Love Know', 263.

⁶ Ibid. 264-265.

imagine a condition of unbroken and unqualified commitment to the good of another, we should have imagined something like the divine life. The Spirit is God's life as it is shaped and directed towards the good of the other by the recognition, the knowledge, of divine life as self-bestowal.¹ Such a movement of inclination, intellection, and desire is never complete within the infinite life of the Godhead because 'this eternal engagement is never a possessing, because it is the act (the knowledge) of love; what is understood prompts and grounds something other than 'simple' intellection. That something other is not just an attitude of consent or approbation, but a movement to which desire is analogous.'²

What can be concluded from examining this essay on Aquinas is that Williams is, firstly, that the divine persons must be understood in within a context of fundamental co-inherence, so that we cannot understand the Trinity as 'individual' centres of consciousness, but rather a movement or process of knowledge-intellection, and love-desire in which 'knowledge' and 'intellection' act as a models for divine co-inherence and perichoresis, and in which the '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.

Williams' most in-depth treatment of divine desire is to be found in his essay 'The Deflections of Desire'.³ As the subtitle of this essay implies, Williams is concerned with theme of negative theology, or more specifically, with the fact that we are dealing with a God who cannot be 'reduced to a finished conceptual scheme, however much we may labour to remove obvious inadequacies and misunderstandings.'⁴ Williams is concerned to show how negative theology applies 'the *relations* of divine life' rather than some 'essence' lying behind the triune life of God.⁵ In order to do this, he engages in an exegesis of St. John of the Cross, specifically focusing on his *Romanzas*. Williams summarises the Trinitarian theology of the *Romanzas* by saying 'Father and Son are 'in' each other, as lover and beloved, and the love uniting them is equal to them. Yet in the Trinity there is one lover and one beloved: all three are one lover, all three are one object of love, since the being or essence (*ser*) of the three is identical with each one. It is as if the *ser* of the Godhead is being identified with the formal pattern of indwelling itself – not with a 'nature' beyond or behind the three, but with the movement of one into another in desire'. He further explicates by saying: 'The love specifically uniting Father and Son is...the love that is the 'excess' of what each desires in the other; it is thus constituted as an equal presence or agent within the pattern of divine agency. But at the same time...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'. This understanding of the Triune love implies an openness: '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

¹ Ibid. 265.

² Ibid. 272.

³ Williams, 'The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure', in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (eds.), *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and the Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 115-135.

⁴ Ibid. 115.

⁵ Ibid. 116.

reinforcement of identity). If so, the designation of both Spirit and divine essence as love makes sense: it is the Spirit as excess of divine love that secures the character of God-as-such.¹

Another important conversation partner in relation to Williams' reflections on the Trinity is the Catholic thinker and theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar. In relation to the Trinity, two texts stand out. The first is entitled 'Balthasar and Difference', and was published in 1998.² Here, Williams sought to relate Hegel and Balthasar to postmodern discussions of difference, trying to show how Hegel's dialectic and Balthasar's Trinitarian reflections (along with his understanding of the *analogia entis*³) lay a foundation for difference that is able to take contingency and time seriously⁴, rather as opposed to the 'curiously disincarnate'⁵ forms in which 'difference' enters into the discussion of many postmodernist theorists (Derrida being exemplary in this regard). Speaking of the Trinity, he confirms what he has said elsewhere

'The Catholic faith is that God is not a subject, nor even a plurality of subjects in intimate connection. God is intrinsically that life which exists only and necessarily in the act of 'bestowal', in a self-alienation that makes possible the freedom and love of an other that is at the same time itself *in* otherness. The extremity of the relation between God and the God-forsaken Jesus is our way into this claim for the life of God-as-such: the divine life is what sustains itself as unqualified unity across the greatest completeness or alienation that can be imagined; and so appears as unqualified gift or...bestowal. The gulf between Father and crucified Son, between Father in heaven and Son in hell, now appears as the immeasurable measure of the way divine love 'leaves' itself, travels infinitely from itself (from self-possession, self-presence). Here there can be no identity prior to differentiation: the only identity in question is precisely total and eternal self-bestowal that constitutes the other. The generative or originary moment in the divine life, the Father, has no reality except in the act of generating otherness and sustaining the unity of divine life across the gulf of immeasurable otherness by the issuing of 'spirit': the life bestowed in its wholeness upon the Son is both

¹ Ibid. 118. To illustrate this deflective movement within the Godhead, Williams make use of the famous icon of Andrei Rublev depicting the hospitality of Abraham. Williams reflects on this image by saying that what immediately confronts us in this image is 'the central figure of the composition, the angel on the opposite side of the table; but this figure does not look back at the beholder but towards the figure on its right. This figure in turn does not directly return the gaze of the central angel but moves our own gaze towards the figure on our right as we look; this third figure does not appear to meet the gaze directly of either of the other two, but the lines of the composition draw us inexorably back to the central figure with whom we began' (Ibid., 129). For more reflections on this icon in particular, see Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2003), 45-63). In relation to Williams' broader argument, through this movement of deflection of desire within the divine life, a theological basis is laid for a negative theology that does not seek for some 'God' beyond God's own Triune being, but is grounded in the relations themselves. The mutual co-inherence of the persons in the Other constitutes the unity of the divine persons, but the existence of love, and the 'excess' of Spirit lays the foundation for a continuing desire, non-closure within the Triune relations that constitute God's identity.

² The essay originally appeared as an afterword to a collection of essays on Balthasar, but was republished in *Wrestling with Angels* under a different name. My references refer to the later collection, edited by Mike Higton.

³ For Balthasar, as Williams argues, analogy should not be understood as a correspondence between the being of God and the being of creation. Rather, Williams defines Balthasar's theory of analogy as follows ('Balthasar and Difference, 80): [Analogy] is the active presence of the divine liberty, love and beauty precisely within the various and finite material/temporal reality. 'The divine' is not present in creation in the form of 'hints of transcendence, 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.'

⁴ Williams explains this in Balthasar and the Trinity' (p. 83) by saying that 'God is not be spoken of by denying contingency...God is not different *like* that: if divine difference were the negation of all finite predicates, God would be the other belonging to a discourse about the finite world. God's life would be subsumed under that of the world, the antithesis of the world's thesis; and out of such a discourse, no possible language for divine freedom or love could be generated.'

⁵ Ibid., 78.

returned to the Father and opened up beyond the duality of Father and Son as the Holy Spirit. Or, in other words, the self-alienating of divine life in the Father's self-gift to the Son 'alienates' itself, posits itself as *more* than a symmetry of self-sacrifice, becomes that which the Son gives, realizes, liberates, from the depth of his distance from the Father.¹

While the language of desire is not so evident here, we can see the same pattern emerging. The language of 'bestowal' and 'alienation' in this passage has the same function as perichoresis in classical Trinitarian theology, divine self-knowledge and love in the work of Aquinas, and the deflections of desire to be found in St. John of the Cross. Here Williams speaks the divine traversal of 'extremity' and 'alienation' through the movement of bestowal, self-differentiation and unification across the divide that is the historical cross of Jesus, the abyss of Godforsakenness that is already accounted for within the Triune relations of the deity.

The second essay, entitled 'Balthasar and the Trinity', is to be found *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs Von Balthasar*, published in 2004, while Williams' was Archbishop of Canterbury.² Williams confirms what he has said previously about Balthasar regarding his theology of Holy Saturday, particularly in relation to his understanding of divine 'self-othering' that lays the foundation for God's creative activity in relation to the world, and his overcoming of the distance experienced between God and God in the cross of Christ ('*Holy Saturday leads us to the very beginning of creation*')³. Important here, and for what is to follow in this section, is that Williams makes mention of the fact that Balthasar references the Orthodox theologian Sergei Bulgakov, particularly in relation Bulgakov's endorsement of an 'eternal kenosis' between the persons of the Trinity (Balthasar renames this as 'divine godlessness').⁴ 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.'⁵ As such, reality is fundamentally revealed to be 'kenotic' and 'ek-static'.⁶ Balthasar's Trinitarian theology was at pains to argue that God should be reduced to 'a single self-consciousness'⁷.

It is within this context of Balthasar's theology of divine self-differentiation, Holy Saturday, and his reflections on the concept of analogy (the so-called *major dissimilitudo* implied by the *analogia entis*), that Williams ventures to say (going a little beyond Balthasar himself, but adhering to the trajectory of his thought), regarding the cross and the Trinity, that 'what is taken up in 'the saving act of Christ is real historical dereliction, unconsolated and unmeaningful failure or suffering' and furthermore 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.'⁸ What we should take note of here is that Williams' reference to non-closure and meaningless suffering (a central of aspect to his understanding of tragedy that we have shown this far) is understood within the context of *creaturely finitude*, and is

¹ Ibid., 81.

² Williams, 'Balthasar and the Trinity', in Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37-50.

³ Ibid., 42.

⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁷ Ibid., 42.

⁸ Ibid., 43.

placed within a context of the soteriologically and christologically circumscribed context of analogy found in Balthasar's work.

It is thoroughly granted here that Williams is trying to open up Balthasar's theology of the Trinity to a more tragic understanding of history, something that Balthasar's theology sometimes resists. Williams has said that 'the temporal conflicts and resistances of 'ordinary' interpersonal exchange, what might be called the sense of the tragic...are often felt as absences in Balthasar's *oeuvre*, despite the often stunningly powerful focus on the unconsolated dereliction of the crucified'.¹ Nonetheless, Balthasar's (and Williams) adherence to the *major dissimilitudo* between God and creation prohibits any simplistic ascription of tragedy to the divine being. Williams own insistence on negative theology², and his suspicion of ascribing 'drama'³ or 'history'⁴ to the internal life of the Trinity confirm this point. He has said (regarding God and created order of things) that they cannot be 'moments in one story'⁵ and that the life of the divine persons cannot be 'a story like the stories of contingent agents'⁶. In light of this, we need to be careful of ascribing the language of finitude, tragedy, or drama to the Godhead, and the only way we could make such an ascription is through a carefully described theory of analogy, whether of the kind proposed by Balthasar, or the kind of *analogia personarum* or 'the analogy of limits' suggested by Donald MacKinnon in relation to the doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity, something we shall discuss below.

It is these considerations we need to take into account as we read the text that seems to be most influential on Ben Myers statement, quoted at the beginning of this section that 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.' The text that Myers seems to be drawing on here is from Williams' reflections on the Trinitarian theology of Sergei Bulgakov⁷, drawing mainly from the Liddon Lectures delivered in 1998, while he was still bishop of Monmouth.⁸ Concerning Bulgakov's theology of the Trinity, Williams says that 'The picture given of the Trinity is strongly and centrally kenotic: it is about self-emptying. 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.'⁹ He goes on: '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

¹ 'Balthasar and Difference', 84. Williams is influenced here by the work of Ben Quash, who has shown that Balthasar often tends towards a more 'epic' understanding of history, than a 'dramatic' one, despite his attempts to expound a 'theodramatic' model. The 'epic' understanding of history is difficult to reconcile with a tragic one. For more on this, see his excellent study, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005). His work also important for this study in the sense that his emphasis on living within the drama of history, not seeking premature closure, coheres with what we have been saying about Williams' own theology.

² Cf. 'Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity, in *Wrestling with Angels*, 25: 'Negative theology...is a prohibition against any thematizing of divine presence, any return to an analogy between God and the subject.'

³ Cf. *The Dwelling of the Light*, 49.

⁴ Cf. Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 241, where he says regarding the Anthonasian picture of God, that it 'absolutely rules out a 'history in God'; there are no transactions in eternity...'

⁵ 'Balthasar and Difference', 80.

⁶ 'Balthasar and the Trinity', 47.

⁷ Williams has had extensive involvement in bringing the writings of Bulgakov into the world of English speaking theology. The best example is Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999). For some biographical details, see *Sergii Bulgakov*, 1-19 for his earlier life in Russia. For some details regarding his time in Paris, and especially his debate with Lossky, and you can see a brief summary in Williams, *The Theology of Vladimir Nikolaievich Lossky*, 32-63.

⁸ Williams, *A Margin of Silence: The Holy Spirit in Russian Orthodox Theology* (Québec: Éditions dus Lys Vert, 2008).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

Spirit.¹ Bulgakov risks a provocative phrase by describing this mutual self-emptying as ‘self-devastation’², but he does not stop there; he endorses a bridging of this potential annihilation through the agency of the Spirit, by saying that ‘the tragedy and tension of the emptying out of the Father and Son into each other, the death, so to speak’ is ‘revealed as life, glory and saving presence.’³ However, Williams qualifies his statements with the following ‘If we were to take this kind of language as strictly descriptive of the inner life of God, we should be not only exercising massive presumption in regard to a mystery that is utterly inaccessible to the finite mind, but also importing into God the stories of tension and resolution that are typical of relations between finite persons in history.’ He goes on to mention that in ‘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; somehow, the self-emptying of the love of Father and Son for each other always ‘overflows’ into another agency of personal mode of active love.’⁴

This statement makes clear that Bulgakov, by using the language of tension and tragedy, is *not* concerned with ‘the domestic dramas of divine persons’.⁵ Williams even says that Bulgakov’s language approaches a kind of ‘mythology’ – even though it could be considered to be ‘potent mythology’.⁶ What can be seen from this is the fact even within this text, a text which seems to be source of Myers’ statement (‘there is something very like a tragedy going on forever between the persons of the trinity’), we can see emphatic qualifications to this statement. Williams does not seem to think that Bulgakov’s language of tragedy and tension can be taken as anything else than an experimentation with imagery, used for the purpose of expounding a specific point regarding the divine persons. Furthermore, we should emphasise that this is *Bulgakov’s* imagery, not Williams’ own description regarding the Trinity. Even though Williams’ defends Bulgakov against misinterpretation in this regard, we cannot assume that this would be Williams’ *own* choice of imagery and metaphor. And even if it was, we cannot interpret such metaphorical language as having any ‘grammatical’ function within Williams’ theology of the Trinity that is substantially different to what we have shown above, regarding the imagery of divine desire, self-differentiation, bestowal, knowledge, love, and kenosis.

On this point, I do not think Myers takes such language too seriously either. One could argue that he is engaging in a rather loose poetic description of Trinity. The very fact that he says ‘there is something very *like* a tragedy’ going on within the triune relations points to the fact he is engaging in a tentative and thoroughly metaphorical description. Furthermore, it seems that Myers’ own definition of ‘tragedy’ does not have particularly strict contours either. For example, if one surveys Myers excellent book on Rowan Williams, you can find the language of ‘tragedy’ and ‘the tragic’ being used in different ways. In the passage we have quoted, we can see that Myers’ invocation of tragedy within the Trinity is an attempt to give imagery to the infinite non-closure and deflection that occurs within the Triune persons. This is one way to interpret the meaning of tragedy, as we have shown in the first chapter and throughout this monograph, namely that tragedy presents us in an exemplary manner with the

¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

² *Ibid.*, 22.

³ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

problem of non-closure, with the resistant objectivity of the world that continues to create difficulty with tidy or finished description. Since Myers describes such an activity (divine desire and its non-closure) as occurring among the persons of the Trinity, such a lack of ending or consolation cannot be reduced to the limitations of creaturely existence, the result of some ontological or moral deficiency, but is inherent to reality itself.

Nonetheless, one finds a slightly different usage of 'the tragic' elsewhere in this book. While speaking about Williams' particular eschatological vision, he says that (unlike some other eschatological projects) it 'refuses any final gratification of human desire. Insofar as it withholds ultimate consolation, it is a tragic vision.' So far so good; however, we goes on to say something surprising: 'But it is tragic, I suppose, only from the perspective of *unredeemed desire* [italics mine]. To the warped neediness of selfish desire, even God's triune love seems tragic rather than the highest bliss.'¹ How one reconciles what he says here with what he says elsewhere is not quite straightforward. Certainly there is a point of contact regarding the reality of non-closure and a lack of consolation; however, in the one instance tragedy is seen as bound up with *divine desire* (and therefore something good and not the result of some kind of moral failure) while the other is bound up with *unredeemed desire* (and therefore bound up with finitude and its concomitant sinfulness). Clearly, we have two distinct usages of the imagery of tragedy, which performatively (whether intended or unintended) makes Myers' usage of 'tragedy' a little bit slippery. In other words: we should not take Myer's language here too literally.

The question remains however: can we talk about contingency or time in relation to the Trinity? It is here that we bring Donald MacKinnon back into the discussion, particularly regarding his suggestion that it might be appropriate to make use of 'analogy of limits' in similar manner to the *analogia personarum*. In his essay on MacKinnon, Williams seems to endorse MacKinnon's suggestion in this regard.² MacKinnon expounds this idea, in his own essay on the incarnation and the trinity by saying '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. For this element of temporality...belongs to Jesus' comings and goings. What is was for him 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. To leave one place for another is leave work undone; to give attention to one suppliant is to ignore another; to expend energy today is to leave less for tomorrow.' MacKinnon goes onto say (rather densely) that 'We have to ask ourselves how far this very conformity to the complex discipline of temporality, this acceptance of the often tragic consequences that spring from its obstinate, ineluctable truncation of human effort, belongs to the very substance of Jesus' defeat. Jesus' acceptance of this part of his burden can arguably 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.' Explicitly relating this to Trinitarian theology, he says 'It is indeed as that which makes such transcription possible that we

¹ *Christ the Stranger*, 96.

² 'Trinity and Ontology', 158.

must first see the divine relation to the temporal. It is a relation we will misunderstand except we see the God so related as triune.¹ What MacKinnon seems to be suggesting here is that the possibility for creaturely temporality, finitude and tragedy should be found within the self-differentiation of the Triune persons, what Williams calls the 'sheer externality' of the Father and Son that lays the foundation for Jesus' own life that is 'paradigmatically, *creaturely*, distanced from God'.²

Williams goes on to say that (in a density that echoes MacKinnon's formulation): '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.'³ Williams' rather recondite formulation is simply an exposition of a classical Christian theme: that the difference of the Father and the Son is ontological basis for the difference that is the material world of creation. His appropriation of MacKinnon's 'the analogy of limits' is simply a teasing out of this idea. The Father and Son cannot be completely 'absorbed' into one another, since this would undermine the difference between the persons of the Trinity. They are in some sense 'negative' poles in relation to one another, constituting a kind of mutual 'limitation' and 'externality' that is inherent in any concept relation of love that maintains the 'objectivity' of the beloved, and does not reduce it to sameness. And it is precisely this 'limitation', this openness towards the Other, which is the personal agency of the Spirit, that is the foundation for creaturely finitude - and the potential tragedy it involves. In this light, we can only apply the language of *finitude* to the life of God only in an *analogical* sense, based upon the mutual limitation of the Father and Son that is the ground of our own contingency, and narrated history of Jesus Christ. It is the divine life of the Trinity that makes the incarnation of God possible, and enables to account for God's self-disclosure in the contingent – and tragic - occurrence of Jesus' crucifixion and ultimate resurrection. It is though reflecting on the narrative of God-with-us, and its involvement in 'the complex discipline of temporality', the 'tragic consequences' and the 'ineluctable truncation of human effort' (MacKinnon) found therein, that we are able to see God's involvement with our tragic finitude and the inherent limitations we are subject to.

In bringing this section and this chapter to a close, it would be good to summarise what we have shown. In this chapter, we have been concerned with the reality of *non-closure*, whether it was talking about the particularity of human suffering that cannot be explained away, or our reflections on the Trinity which advocated an openness or 'unfinishedness' of desire within the Godhead itself. We have also shown that *contingency* is foundational for Williams' belief in our creaturely involvement in the aleatory fluctuations of tragedy. Furthermore, we have shown that Williams' theology of the Trinity does not imply an ontologization of the tragic, thereby opening his tragic theology to the criticism that it implies an ultimate violence or a cosmic, mythological conflict within the heart of being. Rather, we

¹ D. M. MacKinnon, 'The Relation of the Doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity', in (ed.) Richard W. A. McKinney, *Christ, Creation and Culture: Essays in Honour of T.F. Torrance* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976), 104.

² 'Trinity and Ontology', 158.

³ *Ibid.* 158-159.

have seen that all of Williams' various metaphors for the Trinity (self-differentiation, self-alienation, self-emptying, desire, knowledge, love, deflection, bestowal) confirm that he is seeking to expound an orthodox theology of the Trinity that is able to resist closure and cheap consolation¹, thereby opening towards an infinite journey and movement of desiring that is without end. Further, while such an understanding of the Trinity confirms one motif of his tragic theology (the problem of *non-closure*), we cannot apply the other central motifs (the reality of contingency, finitude or tragedy) in any uncomplicated way. This is because God is not implicated in history in the same way we are, and therefore we cannot apply 'dramatic' stories to the immanent life of God. The only way we can apply the motif of *finitude* to the life of the Trinity (in Williams' and MacKinnon's estimation) is through a reflection of the difference and mutual 'limitation' or 'externality' of the Triune persons that is the basis for creaturely time.

¹ By using the term 'cheap consolation', I am obviously referencing Williams' general debt to Iris Murdoch, and obviously T.S. Eliot as well. I am not saying that God does not provide comfort, healing or hope generally. What Williams is criticizing here is, as we have iterated before, the tendency for the ego to be satisfied in its own self-reference. However, as we shall see in the final chapter, one could potentially criticize Williams for overemphasizing this element of self-critical faith.

6. Conclusion: *The White Line*

Rowan Williams has written that 'Wisdom is more than explanatory skill on the one hand and intuitive penetration on the other; wisdom is knowing the scope of tragedy.'¹ Advancing through this study, it could be said that we have been arguing implicitly that Williams is a thinker of the irresolvable *tensions* we find within human life, those aporias which resist easy resolution and final explication, namely our position between contingency and freedom, hope and realism, meaning and uncertainty. Gillian Rose has written that 'Philosophy, ancient and modern, is born out of [the] condition of sadness' in which 'Earthly, human sadness is the divine comedy – the ineluctable discrepancy between our worthy intentions and the ever surprising outcomes of our actions.'² Such a disposition of 'sadness' is expressed in the lines to be found in Williams' poem on King Lear (quoted in the epigraph to this thesis): 'the white line in the tickling / membrane of freedom'.³ The imagery is of a line of tension, something that is held in suspenseful abeyance between wholeness and integrity (on the one hand), and being ripped apart at the seams - potentially at any moment (on the other). Whether it will break, or maintain its shape cannot be certain. As we have stated throughout this thesis, history provides the space in which freedom can be articulated, but history is also a realm of 'necessity', in the sense we have been advocating that term. Within time, our vision is dimmed, myopic and angular so that resolution to the tensions of life cannot be easily found. Nonetheless, we can glimpse the possibilities for greater freedom that can be wrenched from the temporal matrix. To paraphrase Auden in this regard: we can never ask what history is up to, and therefore cannot act as if we knew. Nonetheless, the challenge remains: how are we to assume that freedom which the powers of history deny, thereby being able to pass through freely?⁴ It could be said that it is precisely this 'sadness, this 'tension' between 'freedom' and 'necessity' that Williams as a theologian and a philosopher aims to wrestle with: how do we aim to act in hope, believing that things do not have to stay as they are, while at the same acknowledging 'the long revolution' (Raymond Williams) in which 'The Christian claim...is bound *always* to be something evolving and acquiring definition in the conversations of history', and further that 'it offers a direction for historical construction of meaning, but does not offer to end history.'⁵ In our experience of history, how do we follow and take seriously Wittgenstein's dictum (practically and philosophically speaking) that 'What's ragged should be left ragged'?⁶ How do we learn to stop ourselves and recognise that the solution to our problems probably lies in dwelling upon an answer that seems *preliminary* to a solution (something that Wittgenstein echoes elsewhere).⁷ What does this *difficulty* teach us about our language in general, which is the only place our freedom can be articulated? Williams tries to take this difficulty as seriously as possible, since it is here that we

¹ Williams, *Ray of Darkness*, 202.

² Rose, *Love's Work*, 115-116.

³ Williams, 'King Lear', in *Headwaters*, 60.

⁴ I am referring to Auden's poem entitled 'The Old Man's Road', in W.H. Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), 304-305.

⁵ Williams, 'The Judgement of the World', in *On Christian Theology*, 36.

⁶ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 45.

⁷ Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. G.E.M. Amboscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), § 314-5. I owe this reference to Martha Nussbaum.

can easily be lead into 'the world of speculation' in which our fantasies and world-imaging fail to take account of reality as it presents itself, in all its intractable complexity.

It could be said that sometimes, however, Williams does seem to emphasise this sadness, this tragic realism, this rejection of fantasy a bit too stringently. The starkness of Williams' theology on this matter is summarised by Ben Myers when he says that 'The cost of Williams' achievement is a sort of pervasive ontological sadness; to see all things coloured by a tragedy older than the world. It is no momentary sorrow, but a deep conviction that life must always remain unconsolated, that the best we can hope for is to be stripped bare, exposed, and forgiven under the stark relentless light of reality.'¹ Myers goes on to write later that 'Williams' deep preoccupation with the problem of fantasy' is 'in danger of becoming myopic'² since Williams tends to find such a vision everywhere he looks (whether it be Augustine or Karl Barth). Mike Higton has also written that Williams' 'writing is too unrelentingly *agonized* - too aware of the possibilities of self-deceit, too aware of the dangers of cheap consolation, ever to relax in the Sabbath rest of God's love, feasting at the table of the Son, despite all the dangers that attend such relaxation'.³ In a personal conversation I had with Rowan Williams' friend Graham Ward⁴, he mentioned to me (in a similar way to Myers and Higton) that Williams' thought in this area risks the undesirable implication of what he called an perpetual 'haemorrhaging' (referring to the Jean-Luc Nancy's theory of 'the body' as a 'wound')⁵, in which pain and self-laceration are emphasised to such a degree that a genuine joy and hopefulness is occluded or disguised.

Now it will be admitted that this may be the case. Williams might have a tendency towards a 'pan-tragic' interpretation of writers both ancient and modern; however, what we need to assert here, regarding Myers' reference to Williams' 'pervasive ontological sadness', is that such 'sadness' should not be understood apart from the context in which Williams believes such 'sadness' is situated. For the Christian church, such 'sadness' cannot be removed from the environs of the concrete story of the crucified and resurrected Jesus, and therefore from the liturgical praxis of praise, lament and Eucharist, in which 'the tragic' is given a contextualized anamnesis and setting. Helpful here, would be the distinction Gillian Rose⁶ makes (in another context) between the abstract *melancholia*, in which the outworking of 'spirit' is understood in complete extraction from 'law' (namely, the socio-political process involving negotiation, recognition, and misrecognition) and the process of an *inaugurated mourning* in which such 'sadness' can find its *Sitz in Leben* in the concrete exchanges of culture and human meaning-making. For Rose, the melancholic and 'neurotic' fixation on loss needs to be transformed into the work of mourning whereby the infinite deferral of sadness is 'politicized' and sutured (as best as possible) so that real transformation may occur, and real pain may be incorporated into the process of healing.

Regarding the remnant overtones of Ward's critique, I hope I have shown throughout this thesis that Williams' is no pessimist, and that his sensitivity to the relation between the body, matter and

¹ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 116.

² *Ibid.*, 124.

³ Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, 36.

⁴ The conversation occurred after I had delivered a paper a theological colloquium held at Stellenbosch, September 2013. I again thank John De Gruchy for making it possible for me to attend this event.

⁵ Cf. Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, 189-207.

⁶ Rose, *Mourning Becomes Law*, 63-76. On this, see also Gillian Rose's essay on Walter Benjamin in *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford; Blackwell, 1993), 175-210.

time-taking fully affirms that fundamental 'depth' and beauty to the world as it unfolds itself within the context of poetic activity. Such a world entails that our bodies and matter are 'intelligent', already entwined within the context of language and complexities of representation¹, and that furthermore such an 'intelligibility' is grounded ontologically in the intra-relations of the Triune God, in whom relational dynamics of language are founded, so that there is no state in which 'matter' is not entwined with *Logos*, that is, meaningful communication². This sits very uneasily with Nancy contention that the body (especially the 'naked' body) communicates nothing but itself. If this is the case, then pure *ipseity* will not work within Williams' theological schema. Meaning and unity cannot be merely 'imposed' upon bodies; for Williams, meaningfulness is something always already entwined with matter itself, being the product of the world's fundamental rationality, goodness, and human socio-linguistic construction.

Another critique that could be made is from the perspective of feminist theology. Feminists could accuse Williams' of preferring a strongly Augustinian theology of sin in which humility and the denial of fantasy takes a central place to counter-act the *hubris* that is sin's most defining feature. A feminist might object to this line of thought by saying it is a particularly androcentric or phallogocratic mode of thinking in which a solution to masculine pathologies is subtly used to suppress the voice of women. Such a critique, however, would be too hasty since Williams is fully aware of this potential objection. He has clearly written that the language of humility and dispossession can be used as 'ideological commendations of passivity in an intolerable situation', and therefore he proposes that 'any rhetoric of humility and dispossession should be subjected to suspicion'. Nonetheless, he still asserts that the self-critical style of Augustinian self-knowledge 'assumes that the most pervasive false construction of the self is an ego around whose specific satisfactions the world is to be structured.'³ The main emphasis Williams seeks to make in regard to his Augustinian understanding of self-knowledge is that we can never seek to understand our selves apart from the movement of desire, because, in Williams' estimation, Augustine rejects 'the idea that we could observe the self or mind in a neutral way: because what we see when we look at ourselves is desire', and that 'we are to know and love ourselves as questing, as seeking to love with something of God's freedom (in the sense of a love not glued to any object of satisfaction)'.⁴ Such an acknowledgement of desire as central to the understanding of the self actually hereby coheres with the feminist critique of androcentricism since the acknowledgement of the infinite desire for God works itself out in practices of *ummastery*, rather than seeking to have a finalized picture of the world, as Sarah Coakley has argued.⁵

The final possible criticism we shall mention is the one given by John Milbank. For Milbank, as we might postulate in light of some of his remarks in *Being Reconciled*, while the past cannot be undone (including instances of suffering and tragedy), nonetheless, like a musical note that is heard differently in light of what comes after it, we cannot view tragedy in a such a resolute fashion that we do not pay

¹ This is something emphasised by his recent Gifford Lectures. For more on this, see 'Material Words; Language as Physicality (available from <http://www.ed.ac.uk/about/video/lecture-series/gifford-lectures>, accessed 25/4/2014).

² For more on this, see Williams, 'Nature, Passion and Desire: Maximus' Ontology of Excess', 267-272.

³ Williams, 'Know Thyself', in 224.

⁴ 'The Paradoxes of Self-knowledge in *De Trinitate*', 131.

⁵ Coakley, 'Is there a Future for Gender and Theology? On Gender, Contemplation, and the Systematic Task'. *Criterion* 47.1 (2009), 2-11; and Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 33-65.

attention to the possibility of it being seen differently in light of continuing history.¹ Furthermore, Milbank rejects 'the unsurpassability of the tragic' because such an assertion will ultimately leave 'no possibility for the ethical'. Speaking of King Lear, Milbank says that 'Since this play discloses a universal tragic sway (we cannot redeem our losses and misdeeds, there is no forgiveness), one cannot either mitigate this circumstance nor come to terms with it; that is to say accept it, even though it is true. It is so bad, that it *should* be turned away from, and yet it cannot be. It *must* be turned away from...' ² Milbank seems to be saying that we cannot allow tragedy to stop us from *going on*, from living in and imagining a world in accordance with 'the counter-reality of resurrection, and the possibility that this world already mysteriously participates in that reality'³ where the potential for reciprocity, gift-receiving and gift-giving is not excluded, but continues to be a possibility, in spite of horrendous evil. For Milbank, 'The greatest atrocity requires all the more an access of hope, the greatest evil calls out all the more for an impossible forgiveness and reconciliation, else, quite simply, such evil *remains in force*'. Milbank argues (following from his belief in the *privatio boni*) that something as terrible as the Shoah belongs to 'the contingency of perversity' rather than any historical necessity or an ontology of 'radical evil'.⁴

It should be said that Williams would find little to disagree with here; in his recent Gifford Lectures, Williams made specific (and approving) reference to similar statements made by Milbank.⁵ In light of this positive reference, it could be argued that he acknowledges the fact that we cannot exclude a *priori* potential resolutions to seemingly irresolvable tensions, including tragic conflict. Every tragedy is open to the healing powers of God, and is not shielded from the process of human meaning-making. Nonetheless (though Williams did not mention this in the lecture itself), in light of what we have seen from Williams' comments elsewhere, I suspect that Williams would have difficulty in saying that *all* tragedy, contradiction and loss can find such resolution, even eschatologically. Unless one holds to a maximalist doctrine of *apokatastasis panton*⁶ (something that Williams does not expound) where everything is redeemed, and all losses are recompensed, where all the limitations of time are overcome, then there remains the problem of how one is to understand the beatific vision and eschatological judgement as giving dignity to our existence precisely as *historical* and *limited* beings (as someone like Nicholas Lash emphasised, along with others)⁷, one in which the history of our bodily engagements and identity are not apocalyptically 'suspended' in any simplistic way. This is also the vision we see suggested in his lectures on *Four Quartets*. The remaining question that Williams might propose to Milbank is to whether he believes *all* losses or tragedy will simply be returned or

¹ *Being Reconciled*, 52.

² *Ibid.*, 149. It should be said here that Milbank has MacKinnon in mind here, but such criticisms could also be directed at Williams himself.

³ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵ See 'Extreme Language: Discovery under Pressure' (available at <http://www.ed.ac.uk/about/video/lecture-series/gifford-lectures>, accessed 24/4/2014), where we affirms Milbank's suggestion that the experience of irresolvable tension calls, nonetheless, for us to imagine some kind of resolution. The mode of such resolution is to found, for example, in the realm of fiction and stories constructed in light of the conflicts we experience.

⁶ For an admirable reflection on the *apokatastasis panton*, see J. Christine Janowski, 'Eschatologischer Dualismus? Erwägungen zum »doppelten Ausgang« des Jüngsten Gerichts', *Jahrbuch für Biblischen Theologie* 9 (1994) 175-218. Janowski discusses the history of the term, but also seeks to disentangle its possible future usage from its Origenist baggage. At the same time, she seeks to articulate an eschatology that is not 'geschichtsnihilistisch', or that promotes an 'eschatologische Dualismus', an 'ungeheuerlich Ontologie' that underlies the exclusionary tendencies we find articulated in experiences of the 'Logik des Wahnsinns' and 'Logik des Schreckens'.

⁷ Nicholas Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach*, 164-180.

transformed eschatologically. If the world *telos* is comedy, simplistically speaking, then does not such a position imply a theology of universal reconciliation which (while finding support among early church fathers), is nonetheless a controversial doctrine within orthodox theology. Even if one were to hold a chastened, hopeful theory of *apokatastasis panton* (like Karl Barth and Balthasar did), one should not turn such a vision into a 'historical metaphysic' (to reference Barth)¹ or use it as a theory to overcome the messiness and cultural thickness of our human interactions within the confines of the temporal order of things.² In other words, we should not use eschatological theories in an uncomplicated manner to suture the wounds of history, as if the resurrection can surgically remove completely each and every scarring and harrowing experience humanity has gone through (cf. John 20.26-29, Rev. 5.1-14), as if eschatology could encompass or undo each and every experience of loss.

One must take seriously Milbank's critique of 'the cult of tragedy'³ in which 'the tragic' achieves a kind of 'speculatively idealist' quality, extracted from the continuing movement history and politics. Milbank argues that we have to ultimately look away from 'tragedy' precisely because – especially in the case of truly extreme kinds of tragedy – gazing at it will get us nowhere, it will only paralyze us; ethically we are hamstrung. One also suspects that that – following Badiou⁴ – Milbank believes that focusing on tragedy in all its resilient particularity, its 'otherness', freezes us into inactivity because being so enamoured with particularity and 'difference' we are unable to engage in real, material social-political change. This obviously raises questions in relation to one of the motifs I have advanced in relation to Williams' theology of the tragic, namely the motif of *contemplation*, which could carry overtones of 'the cult of tragedy'. However, I have already mentioned earlier (in chapter one), that Williams attempt to take seriously tragedy should not amount to a pedagogy of pain, or that 'tragedy' is given some kind of 'sacred' status of awe and terror, in the aboriginal and ambiguous meaning of that term.⁵ Rather, I have simply argued that for Williams tragedy provides a paradigmatic example of the world's 'objectivity', of that which resists our attempts to formulate a complete and finalized picture of the world, that it resists our assertions of 'the end of history', or that our socio-political knots or tensions will ever be completely resolved. By responding to tragedy contemplatively, or with a resolute attentiveness, Williams is essentially advocating that we develop a poetic and attentive praxis of *discernment* in relation to the 'the tragic' or 'tragedy', a praxis which in itself does 'nothing', like poetry (as Auden said), but that nonetheless creates a sensitivity towards what is irrepressibly *there*, and is able to instil within us (when suffering is involved) the seeds from which

¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.2: The Doctrine of God*, trans. G.W. Bromiley et al (London-New York: T & T Clark, 1957), 417. For Williams' own reflections on this theme, see Williams, 'Heaven and Hell: A Modern Embarrassment?' *Epworth Review* 21.2 (1994), 15-20.

² In this regard, one can compare the work of Timo Eskola in *Theodicy and Predestination in Pauline Soteriology*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 165-188 who argues that Paul's theology of salvation is universalist and Christocentric, but that nonetheless the 'calling' of individual believers (cf. Rom. 8.28-29) is a *historical event* that is not itself 'temporally' predetermined. Rather, God's plan for salvation is 'predestined' and all are called to participate through faith in Christ in this divine act of salvation. For a slightly different perspective, see Richard H. Bell, 'Rom 5.18–19 and Universal Salvation'. *New Testament Studies* 48.3 (2002), 417-432.

³ *Being Reconciled*, 149.

⁴ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London-New York: Verso, 2001), 18-29. For more on Badiou concept of universalism that traverses the postmodern emphasis of difference and contemporary identity politics, see Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 75-80. For more on this semantic and etymological ambiguity of *sacer* and *sanctus*, see Emile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society*. Miami Linguistic Series No. 12, trans. Elizabeth Palmer (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1973), 452-456.

compassion can grow. Turning away from tragedy is certainly sometimes the only response that can be given, especially initially when the pain is raw and trauma still burgeoning. However (following Gillian Rose) we need to allow the work of mourning to take its course, if we do not want melancholia to reign. This involves taking the trauma and tragedy seriously, not turning away too quickly, which opens the door potentially to repression, and the eventual return of the repressed. To reference biblical imagery here, like the story of the Bronze Snake in the Wilderness (Num. 21.4-9, John 3.14), *seeing* truly is part of any genuine *healing* process¹; denial is a recipe for stagnation and neurotic fixation. The source of our affliction needs to be seen for what it is if we are to begin to find solace and consolation. Admittedly, recalling tragedy and pain is a risky process since (as Paul Ricoeur has argued), all history and memory is a potentially *pharmakon* (a potential poison or cure²), but nonetheless we cannot simply turn away or forget tragedy without some kind of undesirable consequences occurring. I am obviously not suggesting that Milbank holds such an opinion, only that his comments need to be balanced a little more in this direction.³ It should be clarified further that Williams is opposed to a 'political melancholy' which assumes that 'history is essentially tragic or catastrophic, that the enemies of human welfare of always already victorious' and therefore is suspicious of certain 'Messianic' interpretations of history in which social change can only occur magically and violently.⁴ However (apropos Milbank's comments on forgiveness), Williams is also aware of 'the risk and powerlessness of remorse' in the sense that 'no one can guarantee forgiveness' will occur.⁵ Generally speaking, in this regard, one also wonders whether Williams would not have some similar comments to make regarding Milbank's concept of divine forgiveness (as we saw in his comments on Marilyn Adams' theodicy), in the sense that Milbank seeks to magnify the problem of forgiveness to such an extent that the possibility of any real forgiveness being enacted on the interpersonal plane of being between *human* agents becomes problematic; Milbank essentially creates an such expansive problem that *only* a divine being could provide a solution. And one wonders whether this (as with Adams' reflections on God providing a solution to 'horrendous' evil), we have a kind of *deus ex machina* operating here, to the extent that Milbank would need to explicate further how real experiences of forgiveness could occur between human beings, even when 'horrendous' evils were concerned, without simply bringing in 'God' to solve the problem.

As we bring this study to a close, I think it would be beneficial to bring what we have been speaking about into the South African context. From my perspective, it seems to be the case that as we look at the history of South Africa over the past century, the category of tragedy seems to be an enlightening heuristic for interpreting where we find ourselves now. As I write this, South Africa is celebrating twenty years of democracy, and at the same time is entering into a fourth term of ANC rule. However, it is also the first free elections we have experienced without the moral lodestar that was Nelson Mandela, who died on 5 December 2013. Presently, there is also a growing discontent

¹ I owe this insight to a sermon delivered by Robert Steiner at Rondebosch United Church.

² Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2004), 141-145.

³ For some similar reflections on what I have been discussing here, see Stanley Hauerwas' chapter entitled 'Why Time Cannot and Should Not Heal the Wounds of History, But Time Has Been and Can Be Redeemed', which can be found in Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity*, 139-154.

⁴ *Lost Icons*, 156.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

with the ruling party, with reports of corruption, cronyism, mismanagement, and irresponsibility becoming commonplaces of the South African socio-political milieu. While this is occurring, millions of South Africans are experiencing the ravages of poverty and unemployment, as well as HIV/AIDS. Within this context, two factors need to be taken into account, both which bespeak of real, historical tragedy.

On the one hand, many of the inequalities we are experiencing now are simply the historical effects and fruits of apartheid and racially-prejudiced policies like the Group Areas Act (amidst others) which effectively deprived many South Africans of their inheritances and their homes, creating a reality of systematic impoverishment. That we are still living within this effective history (the results of which cannot be simplistically reversed) is a fact of South African life. Obviously, I am not denying the fact that small restitutions can be made here and there for specific individuals and on a systematic level. However, as we reflect on darker aspects of our history, the horrors of torture, rape, murder, and kidnapping which were not uncommon practices of the *de facto* nationalist security forces during apartheid (never mind the history of segregation and white paternalism that preceded it), have left scars and memories which can never be fully healed or recounted, despite the magnanimous (albeit ambiguous) gesture that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was. There are stories which were not told, and some risk oblivion in the land of forgetfulness; and we cannot underestimate the history of such brutal violence being a part of our present reality, which still remains a pretty violent one by world standards. We cannot assume that the TRC has resolved the narratives of suffering which our history bears witness (though I am not suggesting it attempted to do this).¹

On the other hand, the ruling party itself (the ANC) since it has come to power seems to be manifesting some rather troubling tendencies (corruption and the policy of seizure and maintenance of power being some), proclivities which were already present in the period before it came power (even while it was a banned, being an effectively illegal political entity). Here the 'tragic flaw', the ἀμαρτία (in the Aristotelian sense) has become manifestly apparent.² With such factors in play, and without a significant political upheaval on the horizon, political pessimism seems to be an attractive, and a seemingly reasonable option. I am not saying that I endorse such a perspective; I simply giving expression to a major stream of contemporary political pathos.

Into such a context, what might Rowan Williams have to say? It should be said that Williams did travel to South Africa during the 1980's, and penned a reflection on the topic of violence for *New Blackfriars*.³ He also has written about the problem of political remorse and reconciliation within the South African context more recently.⁴ In 1984, he spoke about the difficult position the church found

¹ For a brief reflection on these issues, see Theo De Wit, 'The Adornment of Evil: Narrativity, Evil and Reconciliation'. *Nederduits Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 51.3-4 (2010), 231-237. For a response, see Gerrit Brand, 'Facing Evil: Theological Reflections'. *Nederduits Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 52.1-2 (2011), 289-296. For a more detailed discussion, see Dirk J. Smit, 'Shared Stories for the Future? Theological Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa', in Ernst M Conradie (ed.), *Essays in Public Theology: Collected Essays 1*. Study Guides in Religion and Theology 12 (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2007), 325-341.

² On this issues generally, see Alex Borrairie, *What's Gone Wrong?: On the Brink of a Failed State* (Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Bal Publishers, 2014). However, already in the late 80's and early 90's, there were some who questioned the nascent authoritarianism of the ANC (e.g. Hermann Giliomee, Johann Degenaar). For some of these reflections, see Johann Degenaar, *The Myth of a South African Nation*. Occasional Papers, no. 40 (IDASA, 1992).

³ Williams, 'Violence and the Gospel in South Africa'. *New Blackfriars* 65.775 (1984), 505-513. He has also written essays on the topic of racism. For a sample of this, Williams, 'Nobody Knows Who I am Till Judgement Morning', in *On Christian Theology*, 276-289.

⁴ *Lost Icons*, 144-150.

itself in, a place where neutrality was impossible: you either in your actions and attitudes supported the apartheid regime, or you resisted in whatever manner possible, suffering the consequences of such rebellion. He even references the fact that church's denunciation of 'terrorism' could be heard as a justification of the status quo.¹ He advocated that the church engage in 'small-scale direct actions' where possible, and also 'the exploration of appropriate 'gestures' in defiance of the status quo'.² More recently, Williams has spoken about a 'deeply felt myth of innocence'³ within the South African community (especially amongst white Afrikaners, though not exclusively⁴). He acknowledges that a significant political transition occurred in 1994, but he also comments on the economic situation by saying that 'The maintenance of white privilege by 'freezing' the great majority of the total population within the constraints of a low-wage, labour intensive economy becomes harder and harder in a market-orientated international situation'. He also makes reference to the possibility that 'self-perceptions don't necessarily change when economic and political constraints do...If a significant proportion of the white population remains privately wedded to the self-perceptions that reinforced apartheid, even when the structures have begun to shift, what real conversation, what 'charity' can emerge between former masters and former slaves'.⁵ Regarding history, he has said that 'refusals to confront the past deny the passage of time and the reality of vulnerability'.⁶ And further: 'South Africa should remind us that the corporate selves of the dominant and oppressed groups in a society do not simply lose their histories by the fact of structural change; they thus remain vulnerable, tense and mistrustful constructions to the extent that these histories are not thought and imagined afresh'.⁷ Williams is aware of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and commends its work, but he does wonder (amidst some others concerns), whether 'The good intentions of the Commission have appeared at times as having the effect of cheapening the very language of truth and reconciliation'.⁸ Nonetheless, he says (echoing again Rose's work) that 'The mourning that arises in [a] relational particularity enables me to endure as a 'witness' to other possibilities in the face of catastrophe; even to remain open to the ironic and the humorous; it also, because it recognises that the recognition between persons *happens*, allows the possibility and intelligibility of forgiveness'.⁹ This is part-and-parcel of Williams' belief in the social 'miracle' of charity which can occur amongst people and communities.¹⁰ However (again referencing Rose), he recognises that 'the central tragedy of modern consciousness' relates to the question of modern politics in which 'the militarisation and mystification of the state as an impersonal mechanism'¹¹ results in 'a schism between my moral

¹ 'Violence and the Gospel in South Africa', 511.

² *Ibid.*, 512.

³ *Lost Icons*, 145.

⁴ Williams does complicate this image by mentioning some of the stories that came out of the TRC regarding the activities of Winnie Mandela, which no doubt complicate any theory of 'pure' victimhood on the part of black South Africans. In this regard, some of the stories mentioned by Alex Borrairie in relation to the ANC's (and Umkonto we Siswe's) practices when it operated beyond in the borders (especially in relation to suspected cases of espionage within the ANC) were sometimes far from innocent.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 146-147.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 149-150.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65-115.

¹¹ Historically speaking, the church should admit its own responsibility for this occurrence since the 'mystification' of the state or the 'nation' is something which can be traced to Medieval developments regarding beliefs regarding the *corpus mysticum*, the 'secularisation' of Christological concepts, as well as the reception of the idea of *economia* within theological reflection. For a genealogical study of these terms, see Ernst H. Kantorowicz, 'Pro Patria Mori in Medieval Political Thought', and 'Mysteries of

awareness, my scrutiny of myself as (more or less) self-determining, self-forming, agent and the political location as a subject involved in processes beyond my control, processes for which I can disclaim responsibility.¹ For Williams, movements for political change and forgiveness have to be cognizant of history, those unique narrative details which form us as individuals and communities, as well as rethinking the political order of things, especially the modern, secular notion of the state, and our relation to it.² Taking into account the limitations of history, the particularity of the South African story, as well as reimagining our institutions and interpersonal relations (across the borders of race, class, gender, age) is the only way real change can occur. Without such a procedure, the continuing possibility remains that under the requisite pressure and tension, old prejudices and myths will flare up again (as the xenophobic violence which erupted a view years ago displayed).

In light of these realities, for us as South Africans, our confession should be that redemption and reconciliation, both politically and soteriologically, cannot occur without *memoria*³ ('Liberation is achieved through, not apart from, the awareness of the past'⁴) since, as Eliot wrote, 'A people without history / Is not redeemed from time'.⁵ Taking this into account, Williams might suggest that we as Christians cannot be blind or escape into a world of fantastical wish-fulfillment (forgetful of history and limitation, nor of political constraints) but must seek in concrete ways to embody within our communities practices of *hope* and *imagination*⁶ as well as *cultural resistance*⁷ to hegemonic forces where necessary (e.g. secularist, technologized, putatively 'non-religious' politics), thereby seeing a world within the visible one, one that is scarred and tattered with the remnants of history's apparent disaster, one in which the 'miracle' of charity and mutual recognition are continually possible despite limitations. It could be said that Williams' theology of *tragic hope* is an attempt to see such a world, a world that can only be glimpsed for those who have eyes to see. In a strenuous manner, Williams tries to articulate what it means for us to construct meaning and hope *precisely* within the recalcitrant contexts we find ourselves in, a hope beyond the world of speculation or self-protecting fantasy. Such a hope is possible because Williams believes in the fundamental goodness of the world, and in a God who is able to dwell within a world of contingency and its tragic consequences, in cross, creation,

State. An Absolute Concept and Its Late Medieval Origins', in *Selected Studies* (Locust Valley, New York: J.J. Augustin Publishers, 1965), 308-324, 381-398; Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

¹ *Ibid.*, 152-153.

² The essays to be found in *Faith in the Public Square*, are largely an attempt to rethink theologically and philosophically what we mean by the state. Williams has (since the late 70's at least) preferred the 'pluralist' model of the state suggested by J.N. Figgis (and others like Lord Acton and Harold Laski) in which the state acts as a 'community of communities' rather than an entity that politically, culturally and religiously 'neuters' its constituents. For a brief discussion of Figgis, see Williams, 'Liberation Theology and the Anglican Tradition', in Rowan Williams and David Nichols, *Politics and Theological Identity: Two Anglican Essays* (London: Jubilee, 1984), 20-24.

³ For some reflections on history and memory within a South African context, see Robert Vosloo, 'Memory, History, and Justice: In Search of Conceptual Clarity', *Nederduits Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 53.3 (2012), 215-227.

⁴ Williams, 'Mankind, Nation, State', in *This Land and This People*, 122.

⁵ Eliot, *Little Gidding V*, in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*, 208.

⁶ For some reflections on hope that are inspired by Augustine, see Charles Mathewes, *The Republic of Grace: Augustinian Thoughts for Dark Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 218-243. For some general reflections on hope that are more pertinent to the South African context, see Selina Palm and Clint Le Bruyns, 'Transforming Hope? A Theological-Ethical Vision, Virtue and Practice for the Common Good', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 146 (July 2013), 104-121. One is also reminded here of Cornel West's articulation of a 'blues' sensibility, one that articulates a 'tragicomic hope' that draws on the rich and painful experience of African-Americans. For this, see Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 19-23.

⁷ Rowan Williams and John Milbank, for example, have spoken quite a bit about this (in different ways); in the South African context, however, Gerrit Brand also expressed similar sentiments in the last years of his life. For his views, see Gerrit Brand, 'Faith in the Face of Secularism? Unmasking a Sacred Ideology', and 'Culture, Power, Religion', in *Godverlanger: 'n Huldigsbundeel vir Gerrit Brand – met 'n keur uit sy skrywes*, (eds.) Willem De Vries and Robert Vosloo (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2014), 352-368; 397-416.

ecclesia and Eucharist, in the Christ who ‘plays in ten thousand places’.¹ And whether he is successful or not remains open for debate since the conversation on this difficult topic is potentially endless. Such a continuing discussion is bound up with the reality of tragedy itself, which encourages us to hold onto the question rather than being satisfied with final answers.² It is within the context of such a question that we find ourselves, and it is within this place that we have to articulate the liberty given to us. ‘The white line in the tickling / membrane of freedom’ remains in force, along with its uncertain, but hopeful agnosticism regarding the exact and definitive ‘shape’ of the future. We continue to hope, and to make whatever differences we can, knowing that ‘We are only undefeated / Because we have gone on trying’³. We continue to hope for transformation, that God may metamorphosize the crucifixes of history into instruments of salvation, that the wreckage of the past – the ‘heap of broken images’⁴ – may become tessellated into some kind of cosmic mosaic, even though the dark ornamentation of the tragic may linger on. History is not simply (as Schopenhauer or Stephen Dadaelus might have it⁵) a nightmare in which the only hope is our awakening, or (if the musical metaphor may be permitted) a perpetual *Danse Macabre*, Ligetian *Requiem*, Stockhausian *Kontake*, or ‘Todesfuge’ (‘Schwarze milch...wir trinken und trinken’⁶) but rather – it may be suggested – an eschatological *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, or a transposing fugue of such contrapuntal density that it allows the haunting music of history to ramify and echo. For such, we may hope and desire; the Angel of History moves on.

Furthermore, holding onto this question (within the South African context) might also involve provoking the church to reflect theologically on the problem of evil and tragedy, in light of South Africa’s own unique history, either through robust constructive theological work⁷, or through more informal reflections on particular narratives in light of Christian symbols and themes.⁸ While some work on this problem has been done, I suggest that there is room for more development in this area. In addition to this, and more broadly, I think reflections on the theme of tragic limitedness and the complexity of reality provide a fruitful avenue for reflections on the nature of education and the university itself. Within a technologized and efficiency-driven context such as ours (intellectually

¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘As kingfishers catch fire’, *Selected Poetry* (ed.) Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 115.

² I owe this phrase to Brother Alois of Taizé who mentioned it to me in a private conversation. Williams himself has said that we continue to use metaphorical and paradoxical language so that we may keep questions alive. For this, see *A Ray of Darkness*, 100.

³ Eliot, *The Dry Salvages V*, in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*, 200.

⁴ The reference is to Eliot’s ‘The Burial of the Dead’, from the *The Wasteland*, in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*, 53.

⁵ Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek*, 152-168; James Joyce, *Ulysses*, (eds.) Hans Walter Gabler, Wolfhard Steppe, and Claus Melchior (London: The Bodley Head, 1986), 28 (line 377).

⁶ Paul Celan, ‘Todesfuge’, in *Die Gedichte: Kommentierte Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), 40-41.

⁷ There are some examples of South African theologians reflecting on the problem of evil generally, within the context of theodicy and the so-called debates surrounding the free-will defense. On this, see Vincent Brümmer, *Brümmer on Meaning and the Christian Faith: Collected Writings of Vincent Brümmer* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 211ff.; Gerrit Brand, ‘Om God in goed en kwaad to sien. Oor twee vorme van Teodisee’. *Nederduits Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 53.3 (2012), 1-12. It should be mentioned here that that this last mentioned article was one of the last Gerrit published before his death in March 2013, and his last contribution to the *NGTT*. The article was written in honour of Brümmer for his eightieth birthday, who was his *Doktervater* at Utrecht. On a more personal note, in one of the last conversations I had with Gerrit, he told me he was preparing this article. He asked me to provide him with some references for Ingolf Dalferth’s *Becoming Present*, which I did. So in this regard, I like to think, in some small way, I made his final contribution as the editor of the *NGTT* a bit easier.

⁸ An example of a such a genre can be found in John De Gruchy, *Led into Mystery: Faith Seeking Answers in Life and Death* (London: SCM Press, 2013). While this is a more personal (and theological) reflection on the death of his son Steve (also a well-known theological figure in South Africa), and is not directly related to suffering caused by the effects of apartheid policies, it nonetheless provides us with a fruitful model for future reflections on narratives of suffering, within a South African context. A more pertinent example however (from an American context) which seeks to bring historical suffering (namely, the experience African Americans), as well as personal and theological reflections on tragedy and hope into conversation, is James H. Cone’s *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011).

stemming from Descartes¹, but similar tendencies are also in Plato²), we can lose sight of the questions regarding the procedures that pertain to the advancement of a truly humane culture, in which learning and education can serve as a contributing factor towards an expansive notion of 'the human', that educational systems should be conscious of their place and purpose in society, while at the same time adhering to their properly critical, Socratic function. The density and connectedness of the contingent reality we find ourselves in serves as a reminder that we are never complete in evaluations, and that our judgements and speech are placed before the possibility of revision. The commonly-presupposed idea of education, either in its technologized or career-driven forms, often fails to account for this reality. But it also fails to take into account limitedness and the tragic, the finitude of human creativity, in the sense that the world in all its rhizomed complexity³ resists final control or the ultimate triumph of universal *technē*.⁴

A final thought: Rosenzweig once said that tragedy aims to be a representation of silence⁵, namely the speechlessness of the central agents of the tragic story. While it will be admitted that certain forms of silence can be oppressive, silence, when it is rightly contextualized, can open up spaces of meaning where words fail us, much like the emptiness and ellipses one finds in a poetic stanza, or in a piano sonata⁶. Silence has its own 'aesthetic' contours.⁷ Taking into account these qualifications, holding onto the question, rather than being content with final answers, maybe involves learning to shepherd that silence, allowing it to do its work on our language, and awakening us to that silence hidden within our speech, helping us to navigate around – where possible – language's own potential 'fatality'.⁸ As Walter Benjamin said: 'Silence is...born from the conversation'.⁹

I conclude with Hopkins: '*Not out of his bliss / Springs the stress / Nor first from heaven (and few know this) / Swings the stroke dealt – / Stroke and stress that stars and storms deliver, / That guilt is hushed by, hearts are flushed by and melt – / But it rides time like riding a river / (And here the faithful waver, the faithless fable and miss.)*'¹⁰

¹ John Milbank argues that Descartes sought to motivate a 'Counter-Renaissance' in the sense that he wanted 'to extirpate the role of immanent vital forces and of human innovative creativity, both being seen as dangerously paganizing in character'. It is for this reason that Descartes' concept of divinely given 'innate ideas' leads to – in Milbank's opinion – 'the reduction of Renaissance *poesis* (both artistic and natural-magical) to the modern classical *technē*: the measurable, mechanical world being revealed only to our clear, solitary grasp' which can 'become the object of endless manipulation according to prescribed and absolutely fixed mental standards'. Milbank goes on to say that 'Modern Prometheanism...is paradoxically linked to the loss of spontaneous mental activity and does not lie in straightforwardly in continuity with the celebration of divinely human creativity by Nicholas of Cusa, Pico della Mirandola and others in the Renaissance period'. For this, see John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People*, 82.

² Sean Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues*, 59-91; Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek*, 3-20 in relation to Plato's preference for *technē* over *poesis*.

³ Paul Cilliers, 'Imagining Better Futures: Complexity and Creativity', in John De Gruchy (ed.), *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2011), 31-40.

⁴ For some reflections on this, see Williams, 'Faith in the University', 24-35. Also, cf. Williams, 'Has Secularism Failed?' in *Faith in the Public Square*, 11-22.

⁵ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William Wallo (Great Britain: Routledge and Kegan, 1971), 77. For a commentary on this, see Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis-Oxford: University of Minneapolis Press, 2006), 84-98.

⁶ For more on this, see Williams, 'Can the Truth Be Spoken?' (available at <http://www.ed.ac.uk/about/video/lecture-series/gifford-lectures>, accessed on 5/9/2014).

⁷ See Susan Sontag, 'The Aesthetics of Silence', in *Styles of Radical Will* (United States: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1969), 3-34.

⁸ For this phrase, in a slightly different context, see Jorge Luis Borges, 'An Investigation of the Word', in *Selected Non-Fictions*, (ed.) Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 38.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Metaphysics of Youth', in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), *Selected Writings 1: 1913-1926* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996),

¹⁰ Hopkins, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', in *Selected Poetry*, 99.

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