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THE DIREMPTION OF MEANING

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Abstract

Examining work by Rowan Williams, this essay explores what he often refers to as the 'difficulty' of writing theology. The difficulty of theology lies in engaging the ruse of having ultimate answers to ultimate questions. The stakes are high: 'God-talk' must concern itself with truth, with reality. But theology knows that truth is always a work of grace and understanding always involves a cost. While it is intellectual understanding that is pursued, it is not merely intellectual understanding that we are aiming for, but rather a spiritual understanding through faith. This involves a diremption of meaning. The essay argues that theological 'difficulty' must wrestle with communication and intelligibility with respect to human language, on the one hand, and Christology on the other. The tragic always waits in the wings of such an endeavour and that has pastoral consequences.

Introduction

In this essay for Rowan Williams, and paying respects to a significant aspect of his theological thinking, I want to tease out something of the nature of theology as a discursive endeavour. The burden of my argument bears upon the difficulty of writing theologically. It can be summed up as something like this: the difficulty of theology lies in engaging the deception of having ultimate answers to ultimate questions. The stakes are high: 'God-talk' must concern itself with truth, with reality. But theology knows that truth is always a work of grace and understanding always involves a cost. While it is intellectual understanding that we pursue, it is not merely intellectual understanding that we are aiming for, but rather, for want of a better word, spiritual understanding.[1] I suggest that Williams is also tackling this 'difficulty' in his own way in his work on communication, meaning and intelligibility. And I am taking 'difficulty' in the way he employs it (and George Steiner before him[2]) as what is involved in the struggle for

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[1] I am taking 'spiritual' here in a very strict theological sense: that which is associated with the operation of the Holy Spirit on the human spirit. See 1 Corinthians 2:11: 'For what man knows the things of a man, save the spirit [*pneuma*] of man which is in him? Even so the things of God no man knows, but the Spirit [*pneuma*] of [*to ek*] God.'

[2] George Steiner, *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1978).

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meaning: 'To struggle, to test and reject and revise, is to experience language as a project requiring intelligent discernment.'[3]

There are two aspects to this 'difficulty', theologically understood, and they are related. The first is human language and the second is Christology, and Williams wrestles with these two aspects and what relates to them continually. To understand both the relationship between God-talk and Christ I wish to advance a reflection that arises from Paul's Christology in his Letter to the Colossians. One verse will be the focus for this reflection; actually, one clause from one verse. The whole verse reads: 'He [Christ] is before all things and in him all things hold together [*synestēken*]' (Colossians 1:17). I regard this statement as crucial to a theme that appears several times in Williams's writing and bears upon his engagements with the tragic. Christ is He in whom all things are meaningful; all things cohere. In commenting upon and citing Irenaeus of Lyon in his book *The Wound of Knowledge*, Williams writes of the way Jesus 'enters the fabric not merely of verbal or conceptual exchange but human society, community, making in the *commixtio et communio Dei et hominis* (*Adv. Haer*. iv. 33), of human language in the fullest sense of the word, a shared "form of life".'[4] That phrase 'form of life' is in inverted commas. It is a term not used by Wittgenstein very often, but which has attracted much philosophical attention. Wittgenstein is not referenced in Williams's text, which interests me not as a lapse or failing, but in what I see as the assimilation of the phrase into Irenaeus's Christology. Wittgenstein will figure more and more prominently in the work by Williams that follows. Christ is the 'form of life', echoing the use of morphē in Philippians 2:6-7 and in this way associating language 'in the fullest sense' with kenosis and the incarnation: 'though he was in the form [morphē] of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form [morphēn] of a servant.'[5]

The tension here lies in the Pauline repetition of the same word morphē. The tension, paradox if you will, lies at the heart of the Christological debates throughout the fourth and fifth centuries, concluding with the Council at Chalcedon.[6] But I draw attention to it here because that same tension adheres to language 'in its fullest sense', that *commixtio et communio Dei et hominis* which Irenaeus writes about, and constitutes an important theme in Williams's writings since *The Wound of Knowledge* (1979). Williams takes up this theme in an essay written many years after that early book and many years prior to *The Edge of Words*. In 'The Finality of Christ',[7] he rethinks, and considerably develops, Cornelius Ernst's reflections on God as the Meaning of meaning[8] and Ernst's distinction between the 'substantive' Jesus (in whom all that is meaningful is eschatologically consummated) and the 'ontological' Jesus whose story and significance different

[3] Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (Bloomsbury, 2014), 59.

[4] Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), 32.

[5] Christ as the 'form' [*Gestalt*] is, of course, central to von Balthasar's theological project and given explicit examination in the first volume of *The Glory of the Lord*, translated by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis et al. (T.&T. Clark, 1982). Balthasar was himself influenced by Irenaeus and particularly the theological insight into Christ as the watermark of creation, but the language of *Gestalt* does not do justice to the dynamics of form when it is attributed to 'life'. It might be better to speak of Christ as both the form of the revelation of God and He who gives form, is forming (though the Spirit).

[6] For an examination of the 'milestone' formula of the Council of Chalcedon, see, among others, Graham Ward, *Another Kind of Normal: Ethical Life II* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 201-35.

[7] This appears in Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Blackwell, 1999), 110-23.

[8] Cornelius Ernst OP, 'Theological Methodology', in *Multiple Echo*, edited by Fergus Kerr OP and Timothy Radcliffe OP (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), 76-86.

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theologians explore in their distinct historical settings. For Ernst, and Williams agrees with him (as do I): 'The individual theologian could only make contributions to … a theology-as-culture.'[9] Citing the Pauline text I have referred to above, Williams writes:

> 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 crucial question rather than a comprehensive ontological schema. We may still want to confess that in Christ 'all things cohere', but it is possible to understand this as saying not that 'in Christ all meanings are contained' but that 'on Christ's judgement all histories converge'.[10]

The point I wish to make is that the gargantuan tension in Ernst between divine Meaning and human meaning is not at all lessened by shifting the ground from 'in Christ all meanings are contained' to 'on Christ's judgement all histories converge'. Both translations of the Colossian text may be right, but both of them are also true, ontically and ontologically, and it is only in Christ that they converge.

It is this tension I wish to explore in reflecting upon Christ as holding all things together and the diremption of meaning when, to cite W.B. Yeats:

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned.[11]

The Tension

Let me return to what I called the 'gargantuan tension'. It is gargantuan because it marks a difference between the uncreated and the created; between what John's Gospel refers to as the only begotten [*monogenē*] Son and the orders of creation. We use the word 'difference' to make a distinction, but at a stretch. Not simply because no one can comprehend 'difference' of this magnitude or order, but primarily because our use of the word difference requires a capacity to compare: unlikeness is established with respect to comparable likenesses. How can we determine difference when the difference involved is infinite?

In part, this 'gargantuan tension' is conceptual, and this is evident in the straining language undergoes when adding a negation (*un*-created) or a qualifier ('only' to begotten). We are familiar with creating and generating. We are familiar with fathers who have only one son. But these linguistic additions push the familiar beyond the edge of the signification with respect to 'God'. The words uncreated and only begotten have no content. They *denote* nothing, though they do *connote* through association: they are words after all and, negated qualifiers aside, some sense surfaces through relations to other words that we have used in familiar situations. In what then does our conceptual tension consist? In brief: between a) what can be grasped and what is ungraspable and

[9] Ibid., 86.

[10] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 111.

[11] W. B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming' in *Selected Poetry*, edited by A. Norman Jeffares (Macmillan, 1974), 99.

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b) the tantalising associations that connotatively fringe what has no denotation. Connotations operate implicitly. Some of them can be excavated by shining 'narrow-beamed' attention on them, but they are not directly objects in the way denoted subjects are objects. This implicit, what McGilchrist would define as right-hemisphere,[12] processing generates cognitive dissonance, and since cognition cannot be divorced from embodiment, this tension is registered as discomforting, even frustrating. We might compare this tension to that experienced when problem solving. We can identify the problem—in fact acknowledging the problem is the first stage in resolving it—but there is no solution.[13] We cannot conceive a second stage and so there is no possibility of closure that would bring the relief of resolution. Understanding has physiological effects. It lowers blood pressure, for example.

But the tension is only partly conceptual because we are not treating a problem that is merely semantic. We are treating what we might call ultimacies here: God, truth, reality, salvation. A conceptual problem we might just put aside like a mathematical question we can neither answer nor find a means of answering. Christians can leave this one to the professional theologians, as if theology were some kind of problem-solving exercise in which dogmatic issues can be resolved and all the conceptual pieces made to fit. The stakes of this 'gargantuan tension' are too high to leave to professionals. It is not just about words and their meaning. This language affects what Christians believe, how Christians live, the values Christians hold and the communities Christians belong to and have invested with meaning. In brief: faith *seeks* understanding. The first stage of what Williams, in *The Edge of Words*, calls 'discernment' is interpretative. The second stage is 'to struggle, to test and reject and revise.' That there is some understanding, that meaning can be made of this 'gargantuan tension', is the hope faith holds to. Professional theologians might of course speak of 'ontological difference' and *analogia Christi*, but I doubt such speaking calms any cognitive dissonance or any existential discomfort. And if it did calm it, I would be worried, because theology wrestles, it doesn't resolve. The wrestling, we hope, is productive, but what it has to resist strongly (despite all pressures) is the production of placebos.

Theology as a Pastoral Endeavour

For some time now, modern philosophical and dogmatic theology has been recovering both embodiment and spirituality from facile dualism, on the one hand, and

[12] On connotative and emotional functions as they are conducted in the right-hemisphere of the brain, see Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (Yale University Press, 2010), 94-132, especially 124.

[13] To claim that theological discourse is not about problem solving is not to say that tackling theological problems is not key to theological enquiry. Identifying issues and seeking clarification (even if to conclude that ultimately the answer lies in divine knowledge only) nevertheless is important to the process of understanding error. Theological 'error' can have ecclesiological consequences, as the continual pursuit and making of orthodoxy demonstrates. Neither does it follow from this claim that theological discourse lacks explanatory power. 'Understanding' is attained and being understandable has to be a theological aim. The hope of theological discourse is that there is some shift in the tension of enquiry that faith seeks. To employ a term by Bernard Lonergan, it is hoped that 'insight' emerges (see Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* [University of Toronto Press, 1992]). But what we are treating here is 'explanatory' interpretations that best 'fit' with a) the way we have been created and b) certain sets of already received ideas or what follows from these ideas as part of a case made in an argument.

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mystic vagaries, on the other.[14] It has been much slower in breaking down what is, actually, a class division between the more abstract reflections of theology and what is frequently called practical or applied theology. The professionalisation of theology has not helped here because it has occluded the fact that the task of theological discourse is fundamentally pastoral. To explore the diremption of meaning is no purely abstract philosophical or dogmatic consideration. To work through the text from Colossians about all things held together in Christ and for Christ matters considerably in a world in which there are wars, climate change, struggles over resources and the massive displacement of peoples. War rips apart the structure of everyday life: the accustomed, the habitual, the expected, the routine. The regular and even regulated rhythms of the working day, the seasonal round, the annual cycle are disrupted with threats, fears, shortages, rationing and improvisation. Time is desiccated. What passes for normal collapses and with it the ways we have understood the world, accommodated ourselves to how things fit together, how we have *made* sense of our experience. People are displaced: physically through migration, mentally through anxiety and loss. Home life disappears, families separated. Returning after the shock, in the wake of vast negativity and destruction, is riddled with insecurities. Little can be trusted. The global impact of climate change is only going to exacerbate questions of migration, resources (old and new), areas of affluence and deprivation, and geopolitical tensions.

This is the context in which theology-as-culture today has to be done. So, the 'gargantuan tension' matters pastorally. And it is one of the most important aspects of Williams's theology (to my mind) that theology is pastorally informed, explicitly. In his commentaries on various spiritual writers in *The Wound of Knowledge*, in which his theological thinking is often ventriloquised through the voices of others, he writes, in the wake of writing about St. John of the Cross: 'spirituality can be an escape from Christ. For both [Luther and John], the test of integrity is whether a man or a woman has lived the central darkness of the paschal event; whether they have known why it is that God is killed by his creatures and their religion, and how God breaks and reshapes all religious language as he acts through vulnerability, failure and contradiction.'[15] As is evident, even in this early book, Williams's reflections upon language, God and meaning have come to the fore because of these pastoral concerns, because of a Christology that refused to evade 'the central darkness of the paschal event.' He recognises that whilst 'God breaks and reshapes all religious language', nevertheless what 'is given to us through the encounter between Jesus and his Father is a life capable of endless communication.'[16]

We could say more from the tradition about this 'endless communication', placing it at the dynamic core of Trinitarian *perichoresis*: the Word of the Father breathed by the Spirit, and returned through the Son. And because this communication is eternal, therefore it will be 'endless.' Such endless communication bestows a freedom to speak; our freedom to speak, to think, to imagine, to fabricate and to lie, betray, perjure. But the endless communication of the Word has to pass through the 'darkness of the paschal

[14] See Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Blackwell, 1998). For the reclaiming of human experience and affect for both theology and psychology see Fraser Watts, *Psychology, Religion and Spirituality* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[15] Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 180.

[16] Ibid., 182.

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event.' In this passage through violence, suffering and death lies what Gillian Rose calls and reflects upon in theologies modern and postmodern, Jewish and Christian: 'the struggle between universalism and aporia.'[17] It is a struggle composing her 'disturbing middle', the 'middle, broken but locatable.'[18]

Christology

The 'gargantuan tension' is spanned by Jesus Christ. Williams's Christology dominates all his theology, from the spirituality of *The Wound of Knowledge* to the most detailed outworking of his understanding of communication in *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (2014), its relation to the tragic in his short book, *The Tragic Imagination* (2014), and *Christ the Heart of Creation* (2018). It is a Christology grounded in and developing out of Patristic debates, struggles to define and defend, reflections, speculations and Scriptural exegesis. In the manner of theologians like Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, the Word is God's ultimate act and the inner form of all communication: it is the *Logos* prior to, in and perfecting all *logizomai* (reflection, thinking) and *logios* (eloquence); the *Verbum* prior to, in and perfecting all verbalisation. 'Language behaves as if it were always in the wake of meaning, rather than owning and controlling it.'[19] When Christ comes to 'his own [*ta idia*—property]' (John 1.11), it is not only to humanity, but to all created in Him and through Him. He also enters the capacity of all things to communicate and relate with each other. That which enables one life-form to speak to another, relate to another, is the *archē*.[20] It is this Christological understanding, with a long history in Christian reflection, that interprets Colossians 1:17: 'He [Christ] is before all things and in him all things hold together [*synestēken*].'

Now, all this can be agreed upon, theologically. Communication can even overcome tragic hiatus because discourse will continue. Cordelia may lie dead in the lap of Lear, who himself dies of grief and guilt intoning the words 'Never, never, never, never, never' and calling for a servant to undo Cordelia's button because he thinks, mistakenly, she lives—but Albany ties the loose ends as far as he is able. Business continues, although Albany's commanding voice to Kent and Edgar—'you twain/ Rule in this realm'—is met with equivocation. Kent must leave and Edgar seems neither able to accept the call to duty nor to leave the past behind. Yes, he speaks the concluding lines of the play. But the words return us to Cordelia's response to Lear at the very beginning—'Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.' They point up the diremption of meaning *in* communication, where speaking can be either

[17] Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Blackwell, 1992), 283.

[18] Ibid., 288. 'Locatable' is important here. The brokenness is material, social and historical. It is not as such void of content.

[19] Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 173. See also 120-22. Although Williams highlights here the work of Maximus the Confessor, he recognises a comparable position expressed in Aquinas. It is this correlation between Patristic Christology (and later pneumatology) and Mediaeval theology that draws Williams into the debates about Hegel and Christian orthodoxy, for there is much in Hegel's thought that resonates with this. It also draws Williams to the creative interpretations of Hegel's dialectical thinking that the work of Gillian Rose expounds.

[20] See Michel Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth* (Flammarion, 1993) for an expanded understanding of the inner communication between all things, from rocks and seas, to plants and trees, to human speech and technological advancement.

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truthful and deceitful or both. The speaking that is felt cannot forget Lear's death and the echoing of that 'never'. Such speaking cannot look yet to overlorded leadership but only to death: 'we that are young/ Shall never see so much, nor live so long.' The 'so long' there picks up the colloquial expression for 'farewell'.[21] For all the energy of Albany's continuation of language, communication seems to stutter towards the silence of the final curtain.

Communication may continue, but its quality can be contorted. In fact, in Edgar's closing lines there is a criticism of Albany's all too brisk settlement. Albany has, like Goneril and Regan, said what ought to be said. It is the language of *realpolitik*; a language that can cover over as well as expose. Heidegger famously drew attention to this in *Being and Time* in the distinction he draws between authentic speaking [*Rede*—the speaking that theologians like Barth associated with proclamation of the Word of God (*Rede von Gott*)] and 'idle talk' (*Gerede*) which is inauthentic, conversational gabbling.[22] Authentic and inauthentic are difficult to be precise about. The difference can only be discerned, so the interpretation of these qualities is contextual, even tonal. But the difference in the quality of communications nevertheless remains, and indeed is complicated further, by rhetorical skill. Both Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine (as masters of rhetoric) rightly register anxieties about theological discourse on this count. They were involved in fighting battles directly attributable to theological discourse being used to persuade and sway interests—from Eunomius and Arius, to the Manichees and Pelagius. Skilful theological rhetoric can deploy and tear the fabric of the church apart. It is not innocent. It is politically pliable. Irenaeus was already clear about this when he tackled Gnosticism in the second century. I don't think there is a theologian ever who has not at some point felt the pressure to say 'what we ought to say.' That is, to say what the congregation or Christian readership expects and wants to hear. Neither do I think there is a theologian who has not been tempted by their own rhetorical powers. These shadows of both idle talk and rhetorical manipulation of language do not annul communicative potential (to do and be otherwise), but they do cloud, and can generate ambiguities intended to mislead (as Iago's mind-games with Othello reveal). Tragedy is as much initiated as resolved by communication. Communication can be as much at the service of sin as redemption; as much a vehicle for deception as for wounding truth. As George Steiner noted (and Williams cites with approval): 'We are a mammal that can bear false witness.'[23] That is the point.

What is injured or healed in the quality of the communication is relations, *between* people (and the societies they form) and *within* each individual attempting to come to an understanding of themselves and their circumstances. Paul may advocate that those in the church should 'speak truth to their neighbour' (Ephesians 4:25), but that is not as simple as it sounds. We often are not clear, in our most passionate of pleas and petitions, that we know and can therefore speak the truth. Risks have to be taken. This is not to deny that good, 'authentic' (I really do find that word slippery) communication can be healing by enabling a coherence and a *making* of sense. If Freud advanced the speaking cure, it has become a major current practice in handling trauma. Through cognitive therapy a victim of trauma or repeated panic

[21] Although, I admit the first uses of 'so long' colloquially seem to date from 1710.

[22] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Blackwell, 1962), 203-14.

[23] Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 45.

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attacks can learn how to understand their condition and control the paralysis and aphasia that can erupt when the body remembers.[24] With good and patient therapy the traumatised can learn to speak of their wounding, even if it is hesitant and emotionally fraught. Things can be given names, techniques can be taught, which enable a negotiation with the world and a reconstruction of meaningfulness. Trust in the intelligibility of experience can be built and Internal Working Models can reset relational attachments.[25] But the aporia (Rose's word), the question, the diremption of meaning haunts. Even Christ's wounds persist in the resurrection. That haunting and hurt will take a lot of eschatology to heal. Wounds can suture, but the scars remain. I will return to this Christological point later.

In *The Edge of Words*, Williams advances a poetic rather than a Christological argument for the experience of the 'pressure in and on our language, pushing us towards new intellectual patterning.'[26] This is important for what I wish to develop. The examination he offers is key to Williams's alternative approach to natural theology via the relationship between language, the world and intelligibility. But it runs a risk if separated from the Christology that informs it. For there have been at least two major traditions in modernity that have also maintained the continuities and intellectual coherence of communication, and both of them have informed secular humanism. First, there is the dialogical tradition that has affirmed a social ontology from Marcel and Buber to Hartmut Rosa.[27] Secondly, and more recently, there is the universalism of the dialectical tradition that Habermas developed into his theory of 'communicative action'.[28]

It is important to see that, in the inner theo-logic that relates Christology to the arguments both in *The Edge of Words* and *The Tragic Imagination*, there remains 'a rather odd confidence that language is not so easily exhausted or defeated.'[29] However nuanced the paradoxes of Jesus Christ as 'both fully God and fully human'—barbed paradoxes embraced in Williams's Christology—the commitment to Christ as *Logos* requires, must require, a humanism. Not the pallid humanism of certain liberalisms and rights talk, but the humanism locked into God becoming 'fully human'. For, in this commitment lies a hope (Paul would say a 'hope beyond [*ep'*] hope' [Romans 4:18]), a belief in the nature and perfection of humankind that Jesus embodies. It follows: if humankind is the language speaking animal and if Jesus assumed not only our ensouled flesh

[24] See Babette Rothschild, *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2000) and, more recently, Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain, and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (Penguin Books, 2015).

[25] I am referring here to John Bowlby's work on 'Attachment' developed in the three volumes of his *Attachment and Loss* (Pimlico-Random House, 1969, 1973 and 1980). Bowlby's thesis is that relations of attachment form within the infant an Internal Working Model of herself that gives coherence to experiences of the world in which she is situated. This model is continually updated as the child (and the adult) develops.

[26] Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 129.

[27] The earlier work on dialogicalism and social ontology was examined thoroughly by Michael Theuissen, *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber*, translated by Christopher Macaan (MIT Press, 1984) and radically critiqued by Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. For Hartmut Rosa see his *Resonances: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, translated by James C. Wagner (Polity Press, 2019).

[28] See Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, translated by Thomas McCarthy (Heinemann, 1979) and David Couzens Hoy, 'The Contingency of Universality: Critical Theory as Genealogical Hermeneutics' in *Critical Theory*, edited by David Couzens Hoy and Thomas McCarthy (Blackwell, 1994), 172-213.

[29] Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.

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(*enhypostasis*), but also our symbolic capacities to communicate, then language too or, more generally, communication must also bear a potential for redemption, resurrection. The first gift of the Spirit was, after all, glossolalia. And, as far as I see, there is no gainsaying this as a Christian. In the words of a traditional prayer for Good Friday: 'all things are returning to perfection, through him from whom they took their origin.' I can, then, accept everything Williams says perceptively and persuasively about language, even its hook up to the world (his understanding of 'representation') and its capacity to generate participation (in society, in our own inner complexities and the wider environments which we inhabit). What I question, though, is whether our experience of the world is always meaningful and intelligible just because we can, on occasion, say it is, or because others say it is. I don't accept that on three grounds, only one of which is directly theological.

The first is my own experience, and the experiences of many with active religious faith and commitment whom I know. I view this not in personal but rather pastoral terms: the meaningfulness of one's experience of the world only sometimes is intelligible, and then perhaps only briefly. Of course, language goes on. There is more that can be and will be said. Our communication, communication generally and widely understood, continues. But this ability to 'go on' is not an index of meaning and intelligibility. It can be simply endurance; perseverance in the face of no other options. The meaningfulness and intelligibility, the recognition of creation's inner form, indicates to me a sense of flourishing and that everything is and will be alright. That may be a belief, a Christian belief, that all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well (to cite Julian of Norwich). But there is a gap here between belief and experience, and our ability to trust what we believe is not a constant. Faith and being faithful is far from easy. Many do not live lives that flourish and Christians are included in that 'many'. Most get by and sometimes go under. There is a provocative statement that opens Isaiah 57: 'the righteous perish, and no one takes it to heart; people of good faith are swept away, but no one cares' (Isaiah 57:1). Many people also only face questions about the meaning and intelligibility of life when living hurls a brick through the plate-glass of the everyday. In other words, it is the diremption of meaning and what was simply taken for granted that forces the issue of the way we *make* sense. And because sense has to be *made*, even if we are Christian believers in all things cohering in Christ, even if 'there is a "sense" before we *make* sense'[30], then no one just *knows* how much intelligibility in the world belongs to their making, and how much belongs to the ways in which they have come to perceive and understand things through mere inhabitation (or *habitus*). While the question of what it is to be human can sit comfortably on a philosopher's notebook, the experience of the ruptures in time, in war for example, pitches the question at a plate-glass window and the whole world splinters. The normal and the everyday become the illusion of a surface that everyone has to tread across very lightly. We walk on water, but walk we must, *making* the meaningful and wagering on transcendence.

My second reason for not accepting Williams's argument is also pastoral and returns us to the question of theological discourse. The greatest danger that theologians face is not secularism, it is the proclamation of placebos. Theologians, and especially those who preach, feel the pressure to offer comfort and consolation, and point to Christ as

[30] Ibid., 170.

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the Word who saves. I do not doubt that Christ is the Word who saves, but I am anxious about theology-as-culture—not sufficiently robust in its authenticity (rather than its logic or its exegesis)—settling things. Things are not settled for the majority of people. They live continually with questions, even if they have faith. There is enough religion around that wants to placate and offer either forms of social respectability or group fantasies of an opiate nature. There is too much realised eschatology or access offered to a realised eschatology.

Thirdly, theologically and Christologically, the 'hope beyond [*epi'* + dative = 'contrary to'] hope' in the redemption and resurrection of communication cannot bypass its ultimate silence: the death of the Word. George Steiner, whose work Williams draws upon, has much to say here. In Steiner's still remarkable and pertinent essay 'Silence and the Poet', while outlining the ancient and traditional relationship between language and transcendence (surfacing in modes of address concerning light, music and silence) he remains adamant that language is both 'miracle and outrage, sacrament and blasphemy'[31] in the hands of mortal creatures. As a symbolic species, he argues for a wisdom necessary to draw back from 'a *Logos* incommensurable with [our] own.'[32] To fail to grasp that incommensurability is to try to rival God's Word, to control meaning and intelligibility. In the final section of the essay, Steiner points to what this leads to: poets refusing to speak, unable to speak, because language has lost its ability to communicate without hideous distortions. He points to the relationship between language and dehumanisation, 'linguistic devaluation' which produces 'the suicidal rhetoric of silence'[33] and 'the death of language.'[34] In championing the redemptive promise (because it's at the core of the gospel), 'a rather odd confidence that language is not so easily exhausted or defeated', cannot span the death of the Word. 'Death calls for this silence', von Balthasar claims, in his meditation of Holy Saturday.[35] This silence is 'the absolute emptying of life which [the Redeemer] knew as the Dead One.'[36]

Steiner enfolds and develops what this meditation points to in the rightly famous conclusion to his volume *Real Presences*:

> [O]urs is the long day's journey of the Saturday. Between suffering, aloneness, unutterable waste on the one hand and the dream of liberation, of rebirth on the other. In the face of the torture of a child, of the death of love which is Friday, even the greatest art and poetry are almost helpless. In the Utopia of the Sunday, the aesthetic will, presumably, no longer have logic or necessity. The apprehensions and figurations in the play of metaphysical imagining, in the poem and the music, which tell of pain and hope, of the flesh which is said to taste of ash and of the spirit which is said to have the savour of fire, are always Sabbatarian. They have risen out of an immensity of waiting which is that of man [sic].[37]

[31] George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (Faber. & Faber, 1967), 51.
[32] Ibid., 58.
[33] Ibid., 69.
[34] Ibid., 71.
[35] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, translated by Aidan Nichols, O.P. (T.&T. Clark, 1990), 148.
[36] Ibid., 173.
[37] George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Faber & Faber, 1989), 232.

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I note that 'almost' in 'almost helpless'. From its two slender syllables both aesthetics and humanism, communication and civilisation, dangle above that 'immensity of waiting'. Steiner refigures von Balthasar's meditation on the Word's solidarity with the dead into modernity's temporal location and cultural condition, providing both a context and a task to the symbolic species that we are. The temporal location and cultural condition do not mediate and make Sunday possible. Sunday is not a consequence of Saturday. In Gillian Rose's terms, Holy Saturday constitutes a 'broken middle'. This crack in the intelligible does not make the tragic inevitable, but it does make some silences, some diremptions of meaning, only eschatologically redeemable. And by redeemable I do not necessarily mean that the impact of such diremptions disappears and we are all healed and muscle toned. Like the visible wounds of the resurrected Lamb of God in the *Apocalypse of St. John*, they somehow, somehow, become tokens of love. But this is a love unknown, as Wesley wrote in his famous hymn. This is a love that stretches any human experience of love beyond comprehension, possibly beyond the analogical perfection of terms. The possibility of being transfigured by such love is realised only by entering the diremption of meaning, the evacuation of the intelligible—we grope with and stumble on this paradox, as Kierkegaard recognised. Perhaps the pared down narrative of Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac offers some appalling clue as to what we are dealing with. The tragic irony cannot be effaced, nor its incomprehensibility. It has to be endured. The 'immensity of waiting' is not passive: its gravity *is* grace.

Holy Saturday

Liturgically, this is a day in the Christian calendar of utmost solemnity when the Church comes closest to the nihilism from which it, and all creation, emerges as utterly free gift. It is the most secular of days. It is well-known that the Gospel narratives go silent here. Two verses in 1 Peter appear to fill in the hiatus, the *intervallum* in the rhythm of salvation[38] in which there is no gospel. It seems to suggest a continuing activity of the Logos in realms beyond, below and elsewhere, to which we have no access: Christ, being put to death, 'went and preached [*poreutheis ekēpuxev*] to the spirits in prison' (1 Peter 3:19) and 'the gospel was preached [*euēggelisthē*] even to the dead' (1 Peter 4:6). In later traditions, dating particularly from the fourth century, mythic accounts of Jesus descending to the dead—eternal life wrestling to free imprisoned souls in hell—emerged and entered into the credal confession: 'he descended to the dead', according to the Apostles' Creed. Jesus is given continuing agency, continuity is restored, chronology restored, and a theological intelligibility restored that laces Good Friday to Easter Sunday.

These stories cannot be taken literally. They are products of a theological imagination and the work of mythopoesis.[39] Their fabrication says as much about the inability of the Church to endure the diremption of meaning as they offer extended metaphors of Christ's overcoming of death and all the subsequent powers and dominions that death and contingency brings upon creation. While 1 Peter 3:19 has the preaching as actively done, what

[38] On this see, Graham Ward *Another Kind of Normal: Ethical Life II* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 7-47.

[39] I would agree with Max Müller that because of the ineradicably metaphoric nature of language 'mythology is inevitable … it is an inherent necessity of language' because 'mythology, in the highest sense, is the power exercised by language on thought in every possible sphere of activity', which would include science. Cited by Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 21.

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'preaches' is the one who has gone (*poreutheis*) to the dead: it is being dead that 'preaches'. This is expanded in 1 Peter 4:6, which *does not* speak of Jesus Christ as an agent. The gospel was preached, but *euēggelisthē* is an imperfect passive. I agree with von Balthasar here that Jesus's death places him in solidarity with all who have died, a condition in which there is no agency though there is witness: the witness to the death from which resurrection life is a miracle of restoration and redemption. Only by witnessing to the dead can there be a condemnation and judgement on the effects of death by he who is eternal life. '[T]he dead are called *refa'im*, the powerless ones. They are as if they were not.'[40] With Holy Saturday, we liturgically endure 'the absolute emptying of life which he [Jesus] knew as the Dead One.'[41] In this way, Christ spans what I described earlier as the 'gargantuan tension'; He crosses chaos where meaning and intelligibility have no form—only the directive demands of love and the power of eternal life can offer this. Love shapes, for 'it was not possible for him to be held by [death]', as Peter preached (Acts 2:24).

This more or less follows von Balthasar, but I am wanting to push the event of Holy Saturday in two further directions. The first takes up that 'emptying of life'. Death has to be given its full weight, like the body of Jesus in Caravaggio's 'Descent from the Cross', where the sheer beauty of Jesus's corpse announces the depth of the loss to human life. Death is the consummate revelation of Christ as 'fully human', the *tetelestai* of John 19:30. This has implications for how Christians understand the Incarnation, as von Balthasar points out. But this termination is not necessarily true in terms of Trinitarian operations. Even in terms of the Gospel narratives, the construction of the silence of Holy Saturday is between two poles (Good Friday and Easter Sunday); the narrative ends and the narrative resumes. In between, there is a narrative suspension in which lie all sorts of fluid possibilities. In other words, Holy Saturday is not emptiness, not a vacuum. If we look back to what are traditionally called the 'Seven Last Words of Christ', the third set is a commission to John and Mary ('Woman, behold, thy son! Behold, thy mother!') which suggests the formation of a new community of love that *begins* on Good Friday. The final words ('Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit') are one of the clearest Trinitarian statements in the Gospels. Jesus is, as von Balthasar points out, no longer an agent, but that handing over of the Spirit to the Father is a Trinitarian act, such that divine operation continues *through* the Spirit. From the divine perspective (and this is a pure speculation) Holy Saturday is more like Deleuze's 'fold' where there are 'two poles, one toward which all principles are folding themselves together [Good Friday], the other towards which they are all unfolding, in the opposite way [Easter Sunday].'[42] Holy Saturday is a fold in what separates the eternal and the *saeculum*. From the human perspective, this is not the folding of towels, bed sheets and pillow-cases. It is abyssal and traumatic. Divine agency and even the dynamics of healing continue from Christ's last words on the Cross to his re-emergence. When was that

[40] Von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 161.

[41] Ibid., 173.

[42] Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, translated by Tom Conley (Continuum, 2003), 18. This is only illustrative and the Deleuzian concept cannot be pushed too far. Deleuze admits of a continual fold and unfolding of the material, the historical and the psychological in ways which are what he calls 'chaotic multiplicity' (86-87) and deterritorializing. But there is continual movement in folding and it tends to infinity. It is significant to note that Deleuze may well have come to his understanding of the fold through the late work of Merleau-Ponty. For Merleau-Ponty, the fold concerns the meeting point of the seer with what is seen, the visible, and the fission or cavity that conditions its possibility. He writes: 'this fold, this central cavity of the visible which is my vision' (*The Visible and the Invisible*, translated by Alphonso Lingis [Northwestern University Press, 1968] 146) is the bringing together of both mind and being *au monde*.

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emergence? At what time? What transpired in the tomb? There is an abyss of incomprehension and we cannot minimalize it, because in it we wrestle to understand what is not available to be understood. There is a responsibility to understand and no created thing can take on that responsibility, fathom those depths.

My first question to von Balthasar is whether he gives death its true weight as the diremption of meaning. The silencing of the Word might suggest an opening for contemplation, but while there is something that remains profoundly paradoxical about the death of God, there is nothing apophatic about Christ entombed. This is the frigidity of death and, as human beings, we know the *event* of death but not what it *means*. I note when von Balthasar speaks of that silencing, he seems to point to the diremption of meaning: 'there it takes away from every human logic the concept and the breath.'[43] Though my citation here is slightly misleading. The statement is end-stopped with a question mark. Even the Gospels say little about the corpse. Mark's Gospel is laconic to the point of being pedestrian: he is 'taken down' (Mark 15:46). Perhaps the minimalism indicates aphasic trauma. The Descent and Entombment are the depictions of painters, not Scripture.

Von Balthasar views the *Triduum* as a Trinitarian event. In Christ's 'solidarity', the death is assumed into the Godhead itself as an eternal sacrifice. Christ is slain from the foundation of the world and kenosis characterises intra-trinitarian relations; 'Kenosis inasmuch as it is a possibility in the eternal love of God.' My second question is whether this 'love' is too unnuanced, too sentimental almost, too much a human understanding of the consoling nature of love. I suggest with the crucifixion we are speaking of a 'love unknown'. In fact, the very meaning of love is catapulted beyond human comprehension by the Father putting His Son on the Cross. There is too much 'governing' and 'commanding' in von Balthasar's accounts, which makes 'love' do an awful lot of lifting. Furthermore, divine *kenosis* is only the other side of divine *plērōma*. They both constitute a divine rhythm. It is not kenosis alone then that characterises 'the eternal love of God.' More needs to be said here, but it would detract from my main argument.[44]

This leads me to the second direction in which I wish to take a reflection upon Holy Saturday, similarly contentious and tendentious (and I am not sure in what proportions). The momentum behind this direction is a remark made by Gillian Rose in her essay 'Architecture After Auschwitz'. She is reflecting upon the 'emblematizing of "Auschwitz"'[45] in contemporary philosophy, social theory and architecture, in which 'Auschwitz' 'is presented as a "pure event", which is not assimilable to finitude, history, or meaning as such.'[46] In this way, it figures 'redemptive crisis'.[47] My question is whether my presentation is 'emblematizing' Holy Saturday in a similar way.[48] For the silence of

[43] Von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 83.

[44] I take this further in *Salvation: Ethical Life III* (Oxford University Press, 2026).

[45] Gillian Rose, *Judaism & Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Blackwell, 1993), 245.

[46] Ibid., 242.

[47] Ibid., 245.

[48] There is, of course, another question which I cannot even begin to answer or think through, and that is the relationship between Holy Saturday and the Holocaust. I am not even sure 'relationship' is the right word. It has to be observed, though, that the two scholars who have helped me to prise open some questions about communication, meaning and intelligibility in Williams's theology are both Jewish and their thinking deeply impacted by the Holocaust. They are also two scholars, both thrust into paradox and prophecy, to whom I believe Williams's theology of communication is indebted. Two of the key concepts in *The Edge of Words* are 'representation' and 'difficulty'. The first owes much to Gillian Rose's, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (1996) and the second to George Steiner's collection, *Of Difficulty and Other Essays*. There is a sustained and important engagement with George Steiner's and Gillian Rose's work in *The Tragic Imagination*.

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Holy Saturday does bring redemptive history, soteriology (whether Jewish or Christian) to a 'crisis' and, I am suggesting, it is 'not assimilable to … meaning as such' on any creaturely scale.

But Holy Saturday is distinctive in two ways. First, it differs from and forestalls any 'emblematizing'. It is fixed within finitude and historical contingency: the very mundane fact that Saturday falls between one eventful Friday and one eventful Sunday. While recognised that both liturgical practice and tradition give symbolic weight to this day, they situate it within a symbolic architecture and overriding narrative—the *Triduum*. In this way, a theological economy attracts mythemes and abstractions, both from the theological imagination (as we have seen) and the working of theo-logic that can (though need not and, I think, should not) detach itself from the finitudes and historical contingencies of Jesus's birth, Jewish heritage, death and resurrection in Roman-occupied Palestine. Holy Saturday needs to stand as a very material stele, *horos*, for it *is* the diremption of meaning even while it *represents* the diremption of meaning. Represents, that is, in the way the Eucharist represents: a perennial marker in every liturgical cycle that 'keeps in remembrance', through its very concrete performance and passing, that the 'redemptive crisis' has not yet realised its eschatological resolution. Christians too live out 'that immensity of waiting' (Steiner) between lamentation and thanksgiving. There is no 'ceremony of innocence' (Yeats), yet.

Finally, in tone, Holy Saturday is also distinctive. It is an irruption and a crisis, but the irruption and crisis are both non-violent. All the feverish violence was expunged on Good Friday. So, while the chord it strikes is not a resolving seventh, it is not a day of discord. In the utter emptying of God there is, somehow, a sabbath: a time of letting go and letting be; a time of giving oneself over to a temporal flow sustained when He through whom and in whom all things were created has ceased to be. There is nothing more to be done that can be done. Holy Saturday offers if not rest then respite: as if the 'immensity of waiting' is borne on other shoulders far greater than the making of human history; as if a great intake of breath has been taken that can be breathed out as Easter. This 'respite' installs a 'hope beyond hope' which, by faith alone, is a lifeline thrown into the abyss of Rose's 'broken middle' and gives some direction to Steiner's 'immensity of waiting which is that of man' insofar as this is a 'waiting for' something. It makes the waiting intransitive. There is an expectancy in all waiting.

Conclusion

What, then, can be concluded about the nature of theology as a discursive endeavour? In part, that it has to be pastorally attentive, listening not just to its own voice but the voices that inform and impinge upon it. In Williams's terms, the pressures the world brings upon theological language itself. It *must* seek. That accords with the yearning of faith for fulfilment: to know even as we are known (1 Corinthians 13:12). It abides *in* hope since it abides in Christ who *is* that hope (not just the person in whom we hope and upon whom we project our very human fantasies of what redemption is). Like Hopkins's kingfisher, theological discourse catches fire, but it is not the flame, and sometimes the light it brings is simply blown out by the circumstances it most wishes to illuminate.[49]

[49] I wish to thank my friend David Moss and the many conversations we have had in which we wrestled with these matters.

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CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS

I have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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

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