

What does the writing of dialogue add to the theology of love?

The writing of dialogue has at its heart a conflict. At first glance, writing is what dialogue is not and to see the two come together is to encounter a kind of negation.<sup>1</sup> In one direction, the instability of speech seems to become fixed in a text. In another, a text's stability is rendered contingent, made my own fleeting and improvised expression as it becomes spoken. Located at this conflicted periphery, written dialogue diverges from the conventions of language in important ways. In this essay, I shall focus on one divergence: the departure from the assumptions underlying 'subject-verb-object' structure towards a dynamic of reciprocity in which the speaker is *both* active and passive, both giver and recipient. This concept of reciprocity is generative for our theology in its bringing to bear a love which is at once engaged in all that we do here and now, in our contingent finitude, yet also in its endlessness is attached, necessarily, to infinity. In the Christian tradition, the kind of reciprocity we are presented with in written dialogue recalls the strangeness of Christ's love, in which those facets of infinitude and finitude are ultimately resolved as one.

The argument I shall make will be formed in conversation with two written dialogues which differ in the presented order of writing and speaking. In respecting the integrity of the text, *The Song of Songs* will be taken on the basis it enjoins—as an instance of language moving from imagined voice to the static text—the writer locking in

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<sup>1</sup> Womack discusses this conflict. Womack, P. (2011), *Dialogue*. Abingdon: Routledge, p.4

writing what was, at least imaginatively, previously fluid. In contrast, *The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony* (1662) is from the outset written, but written with the intention of being placed on the lips of ‘this man and this woman’.<sup>2</sup> The *Song* moves from voice to text; *Solemnization* moves from text to voice. Used together, we have access to both ends of written dialogue’s conflict.

Examining the two texts in light of this contrast I will draw out *particularity* and *physicality* as distinctive features of the form, before moving to suggest that foregrounding these features leads us to see the striking playing out of reciprocity in written dialogue. According to this reciprocity, and drawing on John Milbank’s work on ‘the gift’, I will sketch a model of love which is neither unilateral nor linear. I shall then posit that this love, by virtue of its being shaped by the notion of reciprocity, can be at once engaged in the contingencies of this world and yet also tied to infinity. To make this point I will turn to a yet unexplored dimension of the written dialogues’ reciprocity—the reception they solicit from *us*, here and now, the response they provoke as we encounter them.<sup>3</sup> The mood here will be self-conscious of the reader’s dialogue with the text, an examination of the *imaginative* and *social* nature of our ‘speaking back’ to the dialogue, which, I conclude, reveals how finite means reach the infinite. To end I will offer a Christological interpretation of this reciprocal love.

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<sup>2</sup> The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony’ in *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*. Ed. Brian Cummings. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 434

<sup>3</sup> The approach my essay will take echoes its argument. I begin in what the texts say, and listen to them speak. I end in how we receive them; I consider our ‘reply’. The structure is reciprocal.

## I

Writing dialogue involves an order of language which is particular to the speaker and physical in inclination. I will propose this along the lines of the texts' different presented order of writing and speaking.

First, The *Song*'s transition from voice to text indicates the particularity of written dialogue. As part of the canon it is a fixed text yet it bears the marks of having once been open, sung by unique voices in an imagined time and space. Recurring deictic expression brings to light the contingency of the exchange: 'let *him* kiss me', 'I sought *him*'.<sup>4</sup> The indeterminacy of this deixis is dealt with by the particularity of description. Who the elusive 'he' is can be grasped only through accepting the description 'she' offers of him.

Information is connected to a subjective perspective. This is explicit and self-conscious. 'My beloved', we overhear the female voice declare, 'is to me'—in my mind—'a bag of myrrh'.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, the male voice begins 'I'—and not another—'compare you, my love, to a mare'.<sup>6</sup> We know this male and this female only insofar as they are loved and articulated by the other.

Particularity comes to light too in the un-regulation of the *Song*'s to-and-fro which makes for an inexact exchange. We witness interruption, overlap, structural imbalance, as woman's utterance exceeds man's, as man cuts in on woman's speech, as at points their

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<sup>4</sup> NRSV, *Song of Songs* 1.2; 3.1

<sup>5</sup> *Song*, 1. 13

<sup>6</sup> *Song*. 1. 9

speech becomes one. Thus those engaged in the dialogue are perfectly equal, uniform and regulated, but emerge as unashamedly different, wonderfully *unequal* in their linguistic contributions. Writing which records a past dialogue cannot shake off that event's subjectivity.

Identifying particularity at this end of the conflict, as speech becomes text, leads us to consider its presence at the opposite end, as text becomes speech. Indeed, the same particularity rushes forth at the moment the text of *Solemnization* is transfigured into speech. The words, though facsimiles on paper for the most part, general and anonymous, suddenly emerge as the particular words belonging to the woman and man in question. The voices that come to inhabit the text have a dialect, a pattern of intonation, a changeable pitch and volume. The impersonal becomes *hers* or *his*. The invariable quality of 'N.' is replaced with a name, which signifies a history—the name being set, for most, since a few days following birth—and a distinction—it is Adam's naming of things in Eden which recognises their difference.<sup>7</sup> At either conflict point of written dialogue dispassion passes away in favour of contingency. Particularity is a feature of the form.

Second, *Solemnization*'s movement from text to voice illuminates written dialogue as a distinctively *physical* use of language. The liturgy's rubric is difficult to make sense of without at least imagining its vocalization. Flitting between instruction for the future,

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<sup>7</sup> *Solemnization*, p. 436

‘the man shall answer’, and imagined present enactment, the vocalization of ‘I will’, it refuses to exist as merely what it is, asserting completion only upon utterance. Central to these words is the need for them to be said, for physical assent, for larynx, and breath. To borrow Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s expression, the words of liturgy engage ‘my body as a being in the world’.<sup>8</sup> The interspersing of physical instruction — ‘kneeling’, ‘holding’, ‘turning’ — amongst the words to be said reinforces the point that the actions of my body are inseparable from the sense I desire to make.<sup>9</sup>

Knowing that where *Solemnization* is heading is where the *Song* has come from allows us to decipher in the *Song*’s words that same physicality. It reads as movement, ‘leaping’ and ‘bounding’, down the slopes and up the mountains, going out and returning in.<sup>10</sup> The variation in pace mimics inhalation and exhalation. One utterance is slow and the next fast, we almost feel the respiratory muscles tensing then relaxing. We read, for instance, the slowness of ‘for your voice is sweet and your face lovely’ being met immediately with the frantic ‘catch us the foxes’.<sup>11</sup> The writing pays homage to the words’ prior embodied vitality, witnessing to their once being read from the movement upon lips and registered by the action of ears.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962), *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith, London: Routledge, p. 403, quoted in Williams, R. (2014), *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*. London: Bloomsbury, p. 99

<sup>9</sup> *Solemnization*, p. 437, p. 438

<sup>10</sup> *Song*, 2. 8

<sup>11</sup> *Song*, 2. 14; 2. 15

<sup>12</sup> In this sense, many deaf communities, who express this song in sign language, may, in their tactile recitals, approach an articulation truer to the text’s determination. To view a sign language recital of *Song*, see the online Deaf Bible: <http://www.bible.is/deaf/ASESLV/Song/1>.

The points of conflict where written dialogue occurs, the moments where speech becomes text, and text becomes speech, reveal it as a form which is the record of, or the prelude to, the *particular* voices of individuals engaged. Further, it is a form that recollects being, or demands that it will be, spoken aloud. The clearer we see this particularised and physical quality of written dialogue, the clearer too we shall see that written dialogue makes of the speaker *both* giver and recipient, both active and passive, as I shall argue now.

## II

The particular and physical nature of written dialogue makes of its speaker an active subject. Being tied to the experience and history of the speaker, the words of dialogue are always attached to what John Austin calls a person's 'distinctive intentionality'.<sup>13</sup> That is to say that in dialogue speakers bring to bear in the words they speak what they intend to *do*, inasmuch as they imaginatively inherit the part they are speaking.<sup>14</sup> We see here that the particularity of the speaker is what enables their agency, for it is out of their distinctive set of aspirations that their words come to exert 'illocutionary force'.<sup>15</sup> As Paul Womack puts it, 'subjectivity leads to action'.<sup>16</sup> It is in my particularity that I become an agent.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Womack, *Dialogue*, p. 97

<sup>14</sup> We engage in texts by participating in them. This bears upon Coleridge's primary and secondary imaginary distinction. Here we draw on Coleridge's 'primary imagination' — all thought involves a kind of indwelling.

<sup>15</sup> Austin, J. (1975), *How to Do Things With Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 12

<sup>16</sup> Womack, *Dialogue*, p. 96

<sup>17</sup> Hence why it is so dangerous to attempt to reduce the difference of a person. In so doing their ability to act and exert agency is dissolved.

Max Stafford-Clarke, alert to the dynamism of words in drama, offers a helpful way of depicting what I am pointing to in his suggestion for actors as they learn to inherit a part. His method asks that actors label each of their lines with a first person transitive verb.<sup>18</sup> According to this the agency of those involved powerfully comes into view. The *Song* 6.4-9 might read: 'I look at you; I delight in you; I command you; I praise you; I excite you.' *Solemnization*, in its consciousness of 'what the speaker *does* to the interlocutor', hardly needs converting.<sup>19</sup> The recognition that the words spoken do something to the other is already stark—the text is full of what Austin termed 'performatives', words achieving what they set out to in their very statement: 'I plight thee'; 'I thee worship'; 'I pronounce [to you]'; 'I thee endow'.<sup>20</sup>

Physicality is key here too. For in Austin's view the 'illocutionary force' of words relies on their *presentness*, their 'immediate force, not their referential function'.<sup>21</sup> The 'being there' of words is most so when they are embodied, enunciated and brought alive by the movement of face, the meeting of eyes, the hand's gestures, the neck's turns, the affect displays.<sup>22</sup> Strikingly, in a globalized world where so many other instances of the face-to-face have been dismantled, proxy marriage, in which one or both parties are

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<sup>18</sup> Stafford-Clarke, M. (1989), *Letters to George: The Account of a Rehearsal*. London: Nick Hern, quoted in Womack, *Dialogue*, p. 97

<sup>19</sup> Womack, *Dialogue*, p. 97

<sup>20</sup> Austin, *Things with Words*, p. 81; *Solemnization*, p. 436; p. 437. It should be noted that words do something to the speaker as well as the other.

<sup>21</sup> Womack, *Dialogue*, p. 94

<sup>22</sup> Ray Birdwhistell estimated that 'no more than 30 to 35 percent of the social meaning of a conversation or an interaction is carried by the words.' Quoted in McDermott, R. (1980), 'Profile: Ray L. Birdwhistell' in *The Kinesis Report*, 2. 3: 1-16

physically absent, remains legally *unbinding* in most jurisdictions. It is bodily presence which most powerfully enacts illocutionary force.

Yet these sources of my agency in written dialogue, physicality and particularity, are also the grounds for my passivity as recipient, my need for another, my dependency. The particularity with which I am recorded to have spoken, or will go on to speak, in written dialogue—the expression of *my* story, in *my* idiolect—places me in need of *your* story in *your* idiolect. This is because, as Rowan Williams argues, my speech being provisional, ‘from the limited specificity that is this body’, I will perpetually be ‘in need of other perspectives’, other voices.<sup>23</sup>

The bride’s recourse to the women of Jerusalem illustrates the way in which the speaker’s particularity places them radically *in relation*.<sup>24</sup> In the midst of all *I* can see, the bride seems to say to the women as she invokes them, I need you – your eyes and ears to confirm what I see and hear, to hold my view to account, to keep me on the right path. She asks that they ‘sustain me with raisins’ as she is overwhelmed by love; she receives their blessing to ‘Eat, friends, drink, / and be drunk with love’.<sup>25</sup> The presence of the Jerusalem chorus in the *Song* is akin to the congregation’s witness of *Solemnization*. The invitation of both to be present is the lovers’ declaration that my own particularity places me in need of your vision, wisdom, and experience. The limitations of *my* view mean that I stand in need of *yours*.

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<sup>23</sup> Williams, *Edge of Words*, p. 109

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 124

<sup>25</sup> *Song*, 2.5; 5. 1

Moreover, the illocutionary force of what I say depends upon your understanding of my sense. What I wish to enact relies on your listening and attentiveness to what I say. Here, with Williams, we see that ‘trust’ is appropriately brought up in regards to dialogue.<sup>26</sup> As I speak I trust that you will understand me, and as you speak, I trust that I will understand you; I trust that your body will respond to mine, that I will not be ignored or cast aside.<sup>27</sup> We see this supremely in *Solemnization*, as the groom who speaks first gives his ‘I will’ trusting that the bride will acknowledge his words and respond in her own, and that she will do so kindly, caring for the promise he makes, nurturing it with sincerity, knowing that his utterance promises a lifetime together. Human agency trusts that it will be recognised: the child whose cries are ignored for long enough will eventually stop crying, coming to learn that the caregiver does not acknowledge their crying.<sup>28</sup> This is presented starkly in written dialogue where utterance is premised on being heard.

If what occurs in that conflict of writing and speaking is physical and particular, the interlocutor involved becomes subject as well as object, giver as well as recipient. Indeed, the two facets are inseparable in written dialogue. In dialogue my words cannot independently enact something. To exert my agency I must trust that you will respond to me. My intelligibility is realised in the company of you and your perspective. Written dialogue is therefore a space in

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<sup>26</sup> Williams, *Edge of Words*, p. 113

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p. 113

<sup>28</sup> Kermis, C., Digdon, N.(1998), *Children Today*. Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, ch. 3

which ‘the conventional structures of our languages, with their ‘subject-verb-object patterns’ no longer ‘imprison’ those engaged; language dissents from the custom of static process, where one active item works upon a passive item.<sup>29</sup> In written dialogue, woman and man, in this case, *both* understand and are understood, ‘observe and are observed’, in one moment choose and the next are chosen.<sup>30</sup> Their agency, their will to express themselves, occurs in dependency upon another.

### III

The undermining of bounded categories ‘active’ and ‘passive’, ‘giver’ and ‘recipient’ gives rise to a conception of love corresponding to that which Milbank discusses in regards to the theology of the gift. The love he posits is interested—invested in the beloved, desirous of a certain response, and non-linear—in the sense of being reflected multiply, back and forth and over and again. He sees that there can be no pristine edge from which the lover can *watch* their love ensue, no detached philanthropist sitting in the stalls. Instead the reverse, all who operate in love are precisely that: *in* love, encased in its folds, stirred by its currents, utterly involved. In a linguistic setting bereft of the assumed ‘subject-verb-object’ formula it is Milbank’s conception of love that transpires.

Devoid of the rigid separation between giver and recipient, love occurs as caught up and interested in the beloved. As a consequence

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<sup>29</sup> Williams, *Edge of Words*, p. 104

<sup>30</sup> Guite, M. (2012), *Faith, Poetry and Theology*. London: Ashgate, p. 19

of the lover's freedom to flit between the role of agent and recipient—and indeed play out those roles simultaneously—their love can envisage the beloved's response and wonder about the reward it might obtain. This is in contrast to a situation where the lover as 'agent' is only ever 'agent'. There the beloved's response is irrelevant to the lover, for whom their own act is all that counts. Here, rather, love is given with a conception of what it will receive.

We see this in *Solemnization*, as the groom says 'I will' he knows the symmetry to come, he knows that his 'I will' evokes the bride's 'I will'.<sup>31</sup> This love is powerfully hopeful; it is invested in what is to come, the return it will get, the reply on the tip of the other's tongue. It is to be interested not in the warm feeling encountered upon an expression of love returned—the 'I love you too' to the lover's 'I love you', but rather to be invested in the promise of future action, the commitment to that which is concrete, daily, and sustained. Here lies the gulf between the prayer-book's 'I will' and Hollywood's 'I do', the former promising future action contrasted with the latter's expression of present sentiment.<sup>32</sup>

So too in the *Song*, the involvement of the lover in what is to come is made manifest in the expression of love as imperative, the interest in what *will* happen. The bride calls out, 'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away'.<sup>33</sup> Her present love is attached to a future cost: the fair one must rise, must do something in response to her love. Thus to give a gift is to anticipate one back; to love is to be involved—a

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<sup>31</sup> *Solemnization*, p. 435

<sup>32</sup> I am grateful for conversation with Andrew Davison on this point.

<sup>33</sup> *Song*, 8.10

truth which seems most inescapably clear in the sexual realm the *Song* is full of reference to. There, one cannot embrace without being embraced, one cannot give without receiving: to give a kiss is also to be kissed. Indeed, what occurs unilaterally is no less than abusive. We see thus that the love which is enabled in the absence of a bifurcated 'subject'/'object' is not mindless and unflinching but interested and vulnerable, always involving the lover in the beloved, tying her to him and him to her, binding and entangling them: the two become one.<sup>34</sup>

Further, the love we encounter will flow in many directions. The recipient being at once giver as well as recipient means that, instead of being restricted to passive reception of a unilateral gift, they act on the love they receive. Love is not 'linear', applied by *x* onto *y*, but is a complex of surprising reverberations. Here we approach Milbank's argument that 'gift replicates itself in cycles of gratitude', that it flows outwards, finding new voice over and over again.<sup>35</sup> For Milbank this outward flow does not disqualify charity, as Derrida had it, but is what makes it what it is: a joyful entanglement, a stepping into endless relatedness.<sup>36</sup> Its reverberating capacity is not a perversion but a necessity of what love is, and such a capacity powerfully comes forth in these written dialogues. The *Song* expresses this sense in its motif of sending and seeking. 'Come

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<sup>34</sup> Allusion to *Mark* 10.8

<sup>35</sup> Milbank, J. (2008), *Can a Gift Be Given?* *Modern Theology*, 11, pp. 131-133

<sup>36</sup> Milbank, J. (1997), 'The Midwinter Sacrifice' in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 10.2, p. 18. Also cf. Derrida, J. (1995), *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 110-112

away' becomes 'I sought him', 'Depart' becomes 'Return'.<sup>37</sup> One movement is matched with its opposite. We witness a tug outwards reciprocated by a drawing in, a playful back and forth in which love does not extend uniformly in a single direction, but unfurls multiply in constant to-and-fro.

At the level of love as an idea, the same complexity becomes apparent in its referential capacity, the ease with which it alludes to love elsewhere. At the outset of *Solemnization* we thus read that matrimony is a response to 'the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church.'<sup>38</sup> Foregrounded is the sense, as Paul Ricoeur has observed, in which one expression of love refers to another, the way that love echoes and provokes love elsewhere.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, the historical reception of the *Song*, as Ricoeur goes on, reflects the 'great metaphorical interplay' of the love it captures.<sup>40</sup> The love of this dialogue invites allusion elsewhere, it merges and meets the history of our own relationships, as well as touching the theologies of Judaism and Christianity. Just as within the dynamic of written dialogue the lovers themselves do not encounter love as a simple linear flow, so too in the very *idea* of love, which resonates here and there, referencing this and alluding to that, is its complex reverberating character revealed.

Love expressed within and reflective of the dynamic of written dialogue is therefore *reciprocal*. It is interested in the response of the

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<sup>37</sup> *Song*, 2.10; 3.1; 4.8; 6.13

<sup>38</sup> *Solemnization*, p. 434, *Ephesians* 5.22-33

<sup>39</sup> LaCocque, A. Ricoeur, P. (1998), *Thinking Biblically*, tr. David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 271

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

beloved, and it evokes and generates paths of love that reflect its own. If 'active'/'passive' are no longer so easily distinct, patterns of love will emerge which hope for a response, which care about the beloved, which flow in multiple directions. In such a pattern to 'take thee *N* to be my wedded husband' is to take a gift as well as give a gift, I *take* you as mine, but in so doing I *give* myself for you.<sup>41</sup> It is to exclaim, as the bride of the *Song* does, that 'my beloved is mine and I am his.'<sup>42</sup> A metaphysic emerges in which to take implies to give, to provide is also to need, and to be for you is also to have you be for me.

#### IV

Love understood through the lens offered by written dialogue is reciprocal. Reciprocal love, as we have seen, is love which is interested and engaged in the beloved, and which provokes a response. In this sense, it is love 'in the midst', here and now. Yet reciprocal love, for all its engagement in the here and now necessarily has an infinite dimension to it, for its endlessness confronts us with a question: 'who starts this circle off or completes it?'<sup>43</sup> It follows, as John Hughes argues, that love imagined reciprocally must participate in Love itself, divine and everlasting, which 'is behind us and before us, which draws forth our love'.<sup>44</sup> Written dialogue shapes a conception of love that is as profoundly interested in the finite object and setting of its love as it is

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<sup>41</sup>*Solemnization*, p. 436

<sup>42</sup>*Song*, 2. 16

<sup>43</sup> Hughes, J. (2001), 'The Politics of Forgiveness: A Theological Exploration of King Lear' in *Modern Theology*, 17, p. 276

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

inseparable from the infinite—divine—Love which encases and carries it.

To illustrate this point I will turn to a yet unexplored aspect of the written dialogue's reciprocity: the reception these texts solicit from us, the response they provoke. As Womack reminds us, the 'dialogic form is not only something that we come across, it is also something that we do'.<sup>45</sup> Our reception of these dialogues is part of the dialogue, and it is to this reception that I now turn in elucidating how the texts disclose a fusion of finitude and infinitude.

The *Song*, as a written dialogue, invites a reception which engages the imagination. It provokes a creative response. The use of personal deictic terms engage our imaginative faculties in envisaging who *he* or *she* might be. Likewise, in language as flow, rich figurative allusion ensues, requiring our creative participation. Our minds must make something of another's subjectivity, of breasts described as fawns and hair like a flock of goats.<sup>46</sup> These descriptions solicit our going beyond their face value in their mediation of that which we know and that which we do not yet know. The mode of description is not opaque, eluding us completely, but nor is it merely reiterative, presenting us with what we know already.<sup>47</sup> The *Song* straddles the history of our relationships with a relationship we can only glimpse in our mind's eye. It relies on, and thus invites, our imaginative involvement.

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<sup>45</sup> Womack, *Dialogue*, p. 151

<sup>46</sup> *Song*, 4. 5; 4.1

<sup>47</sup> Malcolm Guite has spoken, in a similar vein, of poetry as operating upon a balance between that which is only apprehended and that which is comprehended. Guite, *Imagination*, ch. 1

It is this finite engagement, this asking imaginatively what *I* am to make of these words, which opens the way for discerning the infinite. In letting my thinking go beyond what is there I see, with Jacques Maritain, that ‘things are not only what they are’.<sup>48</sup> I find myself in a world where things transcend their semblance. The artist Stanley Spencer, alive to the finite imagination’s touching of the infinite, painting heavenly scenes set in his hometown of Cookham, described it thus, ‘the world is imbued with potential ecstasy.’<sup>49</sup> The written dialogue provokes in us a finite imaginative response that leads us to an identification of the infinite.

*Solemnization* solicits a response that is social. The text is to be received in company, by parishioners ‘gathered together’, in a public space where people sit beside each other.<sup>50</sup> Psalms are recited, in which ‘we hear Christ speaking “*our*” words’, giving voice to the Church as a body.<sup>51</sup> The fact we register voices apart from our internal monologue affirms to us that what occurs here is inseparable from who is here: a community. Indeed, the dialogue’s recollection of Isaac and Rebecca, Abraham and Sarah, Saint Paul, and Saint Peter attests again to the text’s recipient being one who does not

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<sup>48</sup> Maritain, J. (1955), *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. New York: Meridian Books, p. 127

<sup>49</sup> Stanley Spencer, quoted by Hyman, T. (2001), *Stanley Spencer*. London: Tate Gallery Publishing, p. 120

<sup>50</sup> *Solemnization*, p. 435

<sup>51</sup> Williams, R. (2004), ‘Augustine and the Psalms’, *Interpretation*, vol. 58, p. 19

engage from afar in a void, but in encountering the words comes to stand in a history, in an 'on-going drama'.<sup>52</sup>

This finite reception, however, propels us towards the infinite. This is so because, as Williams has argued, the witness of multiple voices amounts to the recognition that none of them has, alone, the final word.<sup>53</sup> In receiving the text as part of a community and not as an autonomous individual I come to see that what is being said is not complete. There is not one objective finished way of putting things. Rather, I conceive of a journey in which a community of people are attempting together to better articulate what they have experienced. Insofar as this points to the absence of a final word, it points to what is infinite and beyond, an 'ever receding horizon'.<sup>54</sup> Expressing this sense, it is striking that *Solemnization* should end in the recommendation for the couple to take communion: just as the words of people speaking in the ceremony come to a halt, the couple are referred to eat and drink *the* Word. The finitude of people, their limited and incomplete words, point to the infinite one who is eternal and divine.

That which is reciprocal, it was argued, is, in its interest in return and response, absorbed in the moment. Yet by virtue of its endlessness it points to what is infinite. We have seen this fusion represented in the reciprocity that we, as recipients of the text, are implicated within.

The response and reception the texts solicit are finite, yet in their

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<sup>52</sup> A recurring phrase of David Ford's. Ford, D. (2014), *The Drama of Living*, London: Canterbury Press, ch. 1

<sup>53</sup> Williams, *Edge of Words*, p. 124

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p. 123

finitude they have pointed to that endless, eternal facet in what occurs. Love, understood reciprocally, thus can occur in the finite folds of this context whilst simultaneously participating in an infinite love which is eternal. In the Christian tradition, this vision of love, arrived at through the written dialogue, points to Christ.

Christ is the model for our reception. He is the one in whom infinitude and finitude collide most perfectly: as eternal God becomes mortal man; in whom humanity's on-going drama finds permanent fulfilment, finds its final word; to whom the sacraments, in their form—their words—and their matter—their flesh—point.

This is to say that love imagined reciprocally is not a neat formula or an interesting idea, but a participation in God. Indeed, tracing the argument back we see Christ over and again. It is the Son as Trinitarian person who is giver and recipient concurrently, who himself collapses those categories in relation to the Father and Spirit. It is the Son whose love for humanity comes vulnerably, and at a cost, with a desired response attached, as the Epistles' demanding schemes reveal.

Christ's love is, with or without our knowing, the love testified to in written dialogue as we stretch from finitude to infinitude; from our standing as giver to our standing as recipient. The revelation is thus that what is most basic to us, speaking with one another—the exchange of noises and sense, from the baby's first cry to the continued speech addressed even to the relative lying comatose—is

what bears all the hallmarks of our being made in a divine pattern.<sup>55</sup>

Written dialogue, in its creatureliness, in its nature as bodily and innate, discloses us as standing with Christ. It testifies to our being as being-from-God.

## V

The written dialogue is distinct in its particularity and physical inclination. We saw that these features of the form lead to its making of those involved *both* giver and recipient, both subject and object. Here, in its divergence from ‘normal’ language conventions, we encountered reciprocity, which invites a conception of love that is interested and mutual, thus which is invested in the moment and cares deeply about the beloved’s response. Yet we saw too that love being reciprocal rendered this love ‘in the midst’: a love which was infinite, given the endlessness of reciprocal exchange, its coming from and tending towards one who is eternal. In the collision of these two facets in our reception of the texts, we encountered Christ’s strangeness, in which the eternal Word was made frail flesh, making sense of our present ability to glimpse in the finite the presence of the infinite.

On three levels, then, we reach the conclusion that written dialogue leads us to a love that is participatory in its nature, albeit in different ways. First, in that it establishes all those involved as subjects and objects, it sees that the recipient is active as much as the agent is

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<sup>55</sup> Williams too moves from an examination of language to theological assertion in Williams, *Edge of Words*.

passive. It opens the way to a love that is neither unilateral nor linear, but part of an exchange in which the recipient is giver as much as the giver is made recipient. In this to and fro there is no room to stand and watch, preserving one's neutrality and obviating vulnerability; all involved participate. Second, in that reciprocity engages the finite alongside the infinite, in that it is both wholly absorbed in the beloved as he is now, and yet necessarily ordered to an infinite love which sets the reciprocity in motion, the finite love *participates* in a love which is before and after it, extending in all directions, encasing, facilitating, and carrying it. Our human love is a *participation* in the divine, Trinitarian, love of God. Third, love emerges as participatory in that this fusion of infinite and finite leads, for the Christian, to Christ. As we saw, the creaturely occasion of our dialogue testifies at all times to our being made in Christ's pattern. The very act of our speaking speaks implicitly of Christ. Irrespective of our acknowledgement, our words participate in and testify to the Word.

Recognising a love that is deeply participatory involves sacrificing my imagined autonomy and finding myself radically *in relation*. It is to acknowledge that I need and trust others and that to be myself is to be with and for them. It is to see that in love a monologue will simply not suffice.

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