

Necessary Fictions, Real Presences

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George Steiner in his subtle and richly suggestive essay, *Real Presences*, sees in the origins of modernism a breaking of the covenant between word and world which he regards as the significant characteristic of the decades following 1870. For Steiner, this sundering of continuities constitutes 'one of the very few genuine revolutions of spirit in Western history'. Mallarmé and Rimbaud represent the beginnings of a genuinely new aesthetic, 'a parting of the semantic ways'. Before this time, he argues, we could have presumed upon a logocentric order, a Logos-aesthetic, which included the assumption of correspondence, understood as something 'strictly inseparable from the postulate of theological-metaphysical transcendence'². Such a world presupposes 'real presence'.

While there is much to appeal in this argument, I wonder whether the Christian tradition has always had a more healthy suspicion of the innocent collusion of word and world than Steiner allows. The monist ontology at which Steiner hints does not allow for the rich sense of mystery that confronts us in the world of which we are a part: things as things stand over against us, ultimately unfathomable. There are aspects of the Nominalist agenda deeply rooted in the Christian tradition and rightly so. We come to what is real by way of the particular. Steiner, of course, is far from unmindful of this and comments with some force:

The arts are most wonderfully rooted in substance, in the human body, in stone, in pigment, in the twanging of gut or weight of wind on reeds. All good art and literature begin in immanence. But they do not stop there. Which is to say, very plainly, that it is the enterprise and privilege of the aesthetic to quicken into lit presence the continuum between temporality and eternity, between matter and spirit, between man and 'the other'. It is in this common and exact sense that *poiesis* opens on to, is underwritten by, the religious and the metaphysical.³

However we might talk of transcendence we must argue that we are afforded no direct access to that which transcends; our language cannot be other than indirect. We humans are beings embodied in an unfolding, physical and material universe and that materiality forms the conceptual matrix of our thinking.

This was something worked out once and for all in the fires of the great Trinitarian and Christological debates which shaped the thinking of the first centuries of the Christian era. The concept 'Logos', with its strong roots in Hebrew as well as Greek thought and its pre-eminent role in the Prologue to John's Gospel, might have seemed to be the most

appropriate way of articulating a doctrine of Christ but it was soon to be replaced in the language of the creeds by the much more recondite and elusive notion of substance. Logos allows for transparency. It provides a way of expressing that great chain of being which unites creator and creation. But there is no place here for that important sense of the opaque, that necessary otherness which must remain between God and creation, and between things themselves. Although we cannot overlook the difficulties raised by the term, and undoubtedly there are many, substance remains inescapably a category in our talk about the divine.

This is as true in a discussion of the nature of sacraments, which provides the theme for this paper, as it is in the more comprehensive discussion of the mystery of the Trinity and the nature of Christ. In the course of a subtle and probing exploration of the implications of asserting a union between the humanity and divinity of Christ at the level of *hypostasis*, Donald MacKinnon insists:

. . . what is intended is that that altogether unique relation to the Eternal that we name hypostatic union is *malgré tout* internal to the term assumed in such a way that it is constituted by an openness to the divine so uniquely thoroughgoing . . . that it is rendered in itself impersonal. Any corresponding reciprocity between godhead and manhood is denied as ultimately imperilling the sovereign freedom of the Divine, expressed in the redemption of the human race, and its very changelessness.⁴

Here MacKinnon is invoking the logical distinction between material implication and entailment, established in G.E.Moore's influential paper 'External and Internal Relations', to make an important point about the Incarnation. This is a distinction central to the classical tradition of ontological discussion. Aquinas' position is similar, though maybe here at least lacking Moore's elegance of logical form: 'Substance is a thing, whose essence it is, not to have its being in another thing; accident is a thing, whose nature it is to be in another'⁵. Of course, the language finds its origin in Aristotle's discussion of being. This is a distinction MacKinnon uses with considerable force on a number of occasions⁶. Rowan Williams brings out the significance of this:

what is being claimed is that the substantiality, the 'subjecthood', the continuous identity of this individual is so related to the substantiality of God that it cannot be grasped in its full reality without allusion to God as *constitutively significant* for it: this human individual's relation to God is 'internal to the term assumed', so that the humanity of Jesus as independent of its assumption by God is abstract or 'impersonal' (anhypostatic)... If we say less than this, the identity of Jesus becomes external to God and so 'parabolic' in its significance: it is one determinate thing pointing to another.⁷

I am suggesting that this language clarifies what is being asserted when we use the concept 'substance' in relation to sacraments. The

classical language of Eucharistic presence uses substance to claim that the Eucharist ceases to be merely 'parabolic', 'one determinate thing pointing to another'. Christ's presence is 'constitutively significant', it is 'internal to the term assumed', there is no 'corresponding reciprocity... imperilling the sovereign freedom of the Divine'. It is this central insight that the concept 'substance', problematic though it inevitably remains, is invoked to preserve. We talk of a *communicatio idiomatum* between the divine and human in Christ just as we might wish to talk of a *communicatio idiomatum* between the *sacramentum* and *res* of the sacrament. Of course, Aquinas does not do this, insisting that after the Eucharistic consecration 'the accidents do not inhere in any subject'⁸. Substance is in no sense part of what something is: it is simply what it is. Sacramental presence is not a physical presence: in other words the accidents make Christ present sacramentally (they *contain*, or *hold*, him) but do not have Christ as their subject. The underlying thrust of Aquinas' language at this point seems to rest in the combating of a crude and simplistic realism. It would be inappropriate to dwell on this for it is something which has been explored at length on many occasions. This is, however, a significant indication that the terminology of substance is invoked for many different reasons and it functions in many different ways.

MacKinnon's careful reflection on Aristotle's account of substance is a reminder of just how elusive the notion of substance remains. All too often, and particularly in language relating to the Eucharist, people claim to know what is meant by substance. We do not. Our approach to substance hovers between a sneaking feeling that we can define its meaning and a sneaking feeling that it always escapes us. Aristotle appears to be arguing for the making of a logical distinction between primary and secondary substance⁹, primary substance being what is individual and concrete, secondary substance being the general and common. This is certainly how G.L.Prestige saw it in his discussion of the nature of the Godhead, linking *hypostasis* with the former and *ousia* with the latter¹⁰, and many have followed in his footsteps.

Dr P.J.FitzPatrick's study, *In Breaking of Bread*, offers a telling illustration of this theme as it is related specifically to discussion of the Eucharist. With an insight marked by inimitable humour, FitzPatrick points to the absurdities that emerge in the language of what we might refer to as neo-scholasticism: here we have talk of substance concealed by accidents, of reality somehow disguised by appearance, of an underlying meaning safely insulated from ordinary usage¹¹. FitzPatrick is surely right in regarding much of the discourse of substance as an 'apparent camouflaging of Christ in the Eucharist' which uses 'the terminology of substance and accidents . . . to offer a way of fencing off Christ from the indignities bound up with the fate of food'¹². FitzPatrick draws the conclusion that substance is a concept so irretrievably flawed that it can only be abandoned. He goes on to suggest that the more recent phenomenological approach represented by theories of transfinalisation and transsignification fail equally to offer a coherent way of talking of the

Eucharistic presence. He points to the sometimes acrimonious debate regarding the rite of celebrating the sacraments that has petered on in the Church for the thirty years following Vatican II, as something representing a 'tragic failure' in so far as it 'ignores the irreducible particularity of what concerns the humanities'¹³. There is much here of which we should take note. FitzPatrick suggests that we turn from the language of substance and embrace what he refers to as the 'Way of Ritual':

It is because ritual and sign are essential that we need to do justice to the reality of what we see and touch, the reality which is ritually used as a means towards the far deeper reality to which we can only gesture. Aquinas, following Augustine, uses the rich and multiple associations of human eating to point towards a transforming union with Christ which is far closer. It is the reality and associations of the starting-point in eating that give content to what follows, and provide the means for suggesting what lies beyond our conceiving. Once more, the humbler creation is not all the story; but there would be no story at all without it.¹⁴

While we might wish to give a qualified approval to this position, we would do well to hesitate before abandoning the language of substance. It has become clear that, although we cannot do without the notion, we cannot do with it as apparently it is. The absurdities of neo-scholasticism, however, should not entice us from what is valuable. I am suggesting that it might be of value to follow Moore and MacKinnon in retrieving the logical and linguistic implications inherent in the conceptual apparatus of the notion of substance and use these as a way of mapping something of the possibilities of sacramental discourse.

To develop this point a little further, we might appropriately return to a discussion of the work of Donald MacKinnon and take our cue from the fine paper on 'Aristotle's Conception of Substance', to which we have already referred. Like FitzPatrick, MacKinnon is concerned with 'irreducible particularity', that elusive thinginess of things. So, too, was Aristotle. MacKinnon argues forcefully that to regard primary substance as a sort of 'bare substratum, a clothes horse on which qualities are draped' (the image, MacKinnon acknowledges, he owes to Columba Ryan, O.P.) fails to do adequate justice to Aristotle's regard for 'the concrete selfsubsistent thing'¹⁵. There is in Aristotle a recognition of the subtle interplay, at times almost impossible fully to tease out, between general and particular. MacKinnon comments:

Yet even while (Aristotle) is drawn to exalt the formal, he is at the same time reminded that where the efficient, transeunt causality of form is concerned . . . the finished article whether statue or building demands for its achievement the active participation of an agent who cannot be regarded as form *tout simple*, but is the necessary instrument without which form is powerless to initiate or sustain its realisation. If the stress still falls on form, it is on *embodied* form that it is laid.¹⁶

We are, in other words, failing to do full justice to the notion of sacramental presence if we regard it as to do with merely underlying reality. Why is it, we might ask, that though there are many types of bread — bread made from rye, bread made from maize, bread made from wheat, and many different types of wheat grain at that — we are encouraged to use wheaten bread for our celebration of the Eucharist? Is it perhaps because the substance of that wheaten bread is thought to have been kneaded into shape by a long history, a history of which we cannot be unmindful?

It is instructive to turn to St Augustine. In his sermons on chapter 6 of John's Gospel, Augustine teases out the resemblances between the manna of the old dispensation and the Eucharist of the new, the water struck from the rock in the desert and the cup of salvation. The discussion in the *Tractates* might be less precise than we might wish, yet it is in many ways more fruitful than much later discussion of the sacraments in so far as Augustine never overlooks the fact that the sacraments remain signs. Although he certainly distinguishes between the sacrament and what is signified, Augustine emphasises that sacraments are always signs, and that we cannot dispense with the significative character of the sacrament. It is perhaps worthy of note that Portalie, in his great dictionary article on Augustine, saw it necessary to defend Augustine at some length against what he felt to be a 'protestant' appropriation of Augustine's doctrine of the real presence¹⁷. Augustine does indeed bring into the foreground of his discussion an important emphasis on the 'significative nature of the Eucharist as signifying the reality of the immanent union of Christ with the believer and the believer with Christ and the union of all the believers in the body of Christ, as well as the spiritual effect of the sign, the attainment of eternal life'¹⁸. For St Augustine, it is the sacramental symbol, the *mysterium*, which truly signifies the reality¹⁹: the reality is not some thing underlying the appearances but it is truly expressed and made present by the sacramental sign.

The reality expressed by sacramental substance can, I suggest, only be properly expressed by invoking the full range of meanings with which a sign resonates. Here we must draw on the rich resources of imagination, not merely as a way of adding illustration upon illustration, but of teasing out and enriching the very notion of sacramental substance itself. Metaphors change the way we see things (substances). We are dealing, as Paul Ricoeur has pointed out, with 'metaphorical utterance': this is not merely a 'deviation in denomination' but a 'deviant use of predicates . . . in which the logical distance between far-flung semantic fields suddenly falls away, creating a semantic shock which, in turn, sparks off the meaning of the metaphor'²⁰. Such symbols provide us with models, with inhabitable fictions, which, in the way of the physicist perhaps, allow us not only to interpret our world but to transform it. This complex pattern of signification works in two spheres of meaning, the one reinforcing the other. On the one hand the great sacramental symbols, bread, water, oil, fire, and the like, because of their deep roots

in the human subconscious, reverberate in many contexts, they represent a play of meanings which lead us towards an intuitive grasp of our nature as a human family. On the other hand, invoking the rich resources of this symbolism, the sacraments re-enact and make present the Christian's conformity with Christ. They are experienced as the 'first fruits' of the Age to Come. Within the narrative of the Christian life, sacraments provide us with 'models', which, possessing a heuristic force, allow us to remake reality²¹. We see something of this in Augustine's sermons to the newly baptised:

If you have received worthily, you are what you have received, for the Apostle says: 'The bread is one, we though many, are one body.' Thus he explained the Sacrament of the Lord's table: 'The bread is one; we, though many, are one body'. So, by bread you are instructed as to how you ought to cherish unity. Was the bread made of one grain of wheat? Were there not, rather, many grains? However, before they became bread, these grains were separate; they were joined together in water after a certain amount of crushing. For, unless the grain is ground and moistened with water, it cannot arrive at that form which is called bread. So, too, you were previously ground, as it were, by the humiliation of your fasting and by the sacrament of exorcism. Then came the baptism of water; you were moistened, as it were, so as to arrive at the form of bread. But without fire, bread does not yet exist. What, then, does the fire signify? The chrism. For the sacrament of the Holy Spirit is the oil of our fire.²²

The central significance of the language of substance is to be found in its various attempts to express the idea of identity with Christ: the identity of Christ with the Father, the identity of the Christian with Christ. This is a theme preserved most evidently in Eastern thought but it is certainly not without its representatives in the West. St Hilary of Poitiers in the *De Trinitate* reminds us that Christ dwells in us by the mystery of the sacraments: 'He Himself, therefore, is in us through His flesh, and we are in Him, while that which we are with Him is in God'²³. This is a theme taken up also in the early Middle Ages by Isaac the English Cistercian, who was abbot of Etoile, in fact not very far from Poitiers, from 1147 to 1169 and who, as Etienne Gilson reminds us at least once felt sorry that he had not stayed comfortably at home²⁴. Isaac's writings represent a style of 'speculation oriented towards mysticism'²⁵. There are significant echoes here of the thought of the fourth century bishop of Poitiers:

Everything then which is with God makes one God. The Son of God is with God by nature, the Son of Man is with him by person, and Christ's body is with Christ by the sacrament. Consequently the faithful and spiritual members of Christ can truly say that they are what he is, even the Son of God, even God. But he is so by nature, they by sharing; he of his fullness, they by participation. In short,

what the Son of God is by birth, his members are by adoption, according to the words of scripture: 'You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, enabling us to cry, "Abba! Father!"'²⁶

Much of the earlier part of this discussion has focused on talk of substance in relation to the Eucharist. This has been perhaps inevitable, but it is unfortunate. It would be contrary to the tenor of this paper to treat the Eucharist in isolation from the other sacraments. The sacraments are not discrete events. As the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas has it:

Our Lord, before He left His disciples, offered them a sort of 'diagram' of the Kingdom when He gathered them together in the Upper Room. It was not one 'sacrament' out of 'two' or 'seven' that he offered them, nor simply a memorial of Himself, but a real image of the Kingdom . . . In the Eucharist, therefore, the Church found *the structure of the Kingdom*, and it was this structure that she transferred to her own structure.²⁷

This 'diagram' is given flesh and blood in a life-style shaped by our communion together and allows an intimate and rich pattern of inter-relationships, which the sacramental system calls into being.

It is of the nature of sacraments that God reveals himself through what he is not. In a way, we can claim for a sacrament what Wallace Stevens claims for a poem in saying that the poet speaks 'of things that do not exist without the words'²⁸: sacraments speak of things that do not exist, things that have no presence, without the sacramental sign. The reality of sacramental presence works as 'a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together'²⁹. Levi-Strauss was wont to remind his students of things that are not only *bonnes à manger* (good to eat) but also *bonnes à penser* (good to think with). In what are necessary forms of communication, grounded in our finite nature as human beings, we are offered a way of understanding our relationships and our world anew. Having established the logical function of substance in sacramental language, our understanding of the sacraments becomes more and more enriched as we tease out the notion of substance, of what something is, by way of the contribution made by the poet, and as we allow the subtleties of imagination to illuminate and add depth to our experience. We must come to the sacraments, having gained from insights that the Old Testament might offer, and the New, adding to this the witness of the anthropologist and historian. The things with which we are involved not only point our way to Christ, but allow us to experience and relish his presence.

1 George Steiner, *Real Presences*, Faber & Faber, 1989, p 93.

2 George Steiner, *op cit*, p 119.

3 George Steiner, *op cit*, p 227.

4 Donald MacKinnon, 'Prolegomena to Christology', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 33, 1982, p 153.

5 Aquinas, *Questiones Quodlibetales*, IX, a. 5 ad 2.

6 G.E. Moore's 'External and Internal Relations' was published in his *Philosophical*

- Studies*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922, pp 276–309. Apart from the article by Rowan Williams, we must refer to three pieces by MacKinnon himself: 'Aristotle's Conception of Substance' in *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, ed. Renford Bambrough, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965, pp 97–119: "Substance" in Christology — A Cross-Bench View', in *Christ, Faith and History*, ed. S. Sykes & J.P. Clayton, Cambridge, 1972, pp 279–300: 'The Problem of the "System of Projection" appropriate to Christian Theological Statements', in *Exploration in Theology 5*, S.C.M., 1979, pp 70–89, esp. pp 85–88. Here he refers the reader to the important paper by Professor Jonathan Bennett, 'Entailment', *Philosophical Review*, 78, 1969, pp 197–236.
- 7 Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Ontology', in *Christ, Ethics and Tragedy*, ed. Kenneth Surin, Cambridge, 1989, p 80.
 - 8 *Summa Theologiae*, 3a, 77, 1.
 - 9 See *Categories*, 5, 2a. 11–16; *Metaphysics*, VII. 11. 1037a 5.
 - 10 G.L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, S.P.C.K. 1964, pp 168–178.
 - 11 P.J. FitzPatrick. In *Breaking of Bread* Cambridge. 1993, p 138: See also p 206, p 264.
 - 12 P.J. FitzPatrick, *op cit.*, p 231.
 - 13 P.J. FitzPatrick, *op cit.*, p 354.
 - 14 P.J. FitzPatrick, *op.cit.*, p 206.
 - 15 'Aristotle's Conception of Substance', p 103.
 - 16 'Aristotle's Conception of Substance', p 105.
 - 17 E. Portalié, *A Guide to the Thought of St Augustine*, trans. R Bastian, Burns Oates, 1960 pp 247–260.
 - 18 St Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John, 11–27*, trans. John W. Rettig, *Fathers of the Church*, vol 79, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, 1988, note 34, p 268. Rettig refers the reader to an important series of studies. M-F Berrouard. 'Pour une réflexion sur le 'sacramentum' augustinien. La Manne et l'Eucharistie dans le Tractatus XXVI, 11–12 in *Ioannis Evangelium*, ' *Forma Futuri: Studi in onore del Cardinale Michele Pellegrino*, Turin 1975, pp 830–844: M-F Berrouard 'L'être sacramental de l'eucharistie selon saint Augustin: Commentaire de Io 6, 60–63 dans le Tractatus XXVII, 1–6. et 11–12 in *Ioannis Evangelium*', in *Nouvelle revue théologique*, 99 (1977) 702–721; E. Siedlecki, *A Patristic Synthesis of John VI*, 54–55. Mundeheim, III, 1956.
 - 19 See, P.-Th. Camelot. 'Réalisme et symbolisme dans le doctrine eucharistique de S. Augustin', in *Revue de Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, 31, (1947), pp 394–410.
 - 20 Paul Ricoeur. 'Imagination in Discourse and in Action', in *Analecta Husserliana*, vol 8, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymienieka, Reidel, London 1978, p 7.
 - 21 See Ricoeur, *art. cit.*, p 9–10.
 - 22 Easter Sunday, Sermon 227. *The Fathers of the Church*, vol 38, trans. Sister Mary Sarah Muldowney, R.S.M., New York, 1959, pp 195 — 198. See also the very similar sermon on the Holy Eucharist, Sermon 6, (Den.) in *Fathers of the Church* vol 11, trans. Denis. J. Kavanagh, O.S.A., New York, 1951, pp 321–326.
 - 23 St Hilary, The Trinity, trans. Stephen McKenna, *Fathers of the Church*, vol 25 New York, 1954, Bk 8, 14, p 286.
 - 24 PL 194, 1896 A B. See Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, Sheed & Ward, London, 1978, p 168–9, 632.
 - 25 Gilson, p 168.
 - 26 Isaac of Stella, *Sermons*, 42. See also 2. (man and woman capable of deification).
 - 27 John D. Zizioulas, 'Apostolic Continuity and Succession', in *Being as Communion*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1985, p 206.
 - 28 Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, Faber. 1984, p 32.
 - 29 This phrase from an unattributed work of Terry Eagleton in which, in a completely different context, Professor Eagleton talks of meaning, is cited in Steiner, *op. cit.*, p 123.