

SERGII BULGAKOV'S LINGUISTIC TRINITY¹

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Abstract

As the work of Sergii Bulgakov has become more widely available in English, his Trinitarian theology has become a subject of particular interest. This article analyses his less well-known works on the Trinity from the 1920s, arguing that the understanding of Trinitarian doctrine developed there is inseparable from Bulgakov's analyses of language and consciousness. By analysing Bulgakov's approach to the Trinity via language, this article will draw particular attention to his negotiation of the notion of divine transcendence. We will see that Bulgakov's writings on the Trinity display, contrary to received opinion, a deep apophatic tendency, or recognition of divine transcendence. But we will also see that his more thoroughly linguistic approach to the Trinity, in which divine transcendence flows from what it means for God to be Love, contradicts his explicit discussion of divine transcendence elsewhere as a transcendence of the Father alone.

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For Natasha Franklin (†2021), from whom I received the enduring injunction to awaken my Russian soul. Вечная Память!

Introduction

This article will examine the Trinitarian theology of the Russian philosopher-theologian Sergii Bulgakov (1871-1944). Numerous studies of Bulgakov's approach to Trinitarian doctrine already exist in English,¹ which tend to draw heavily upon his famous dogmatic trilogy *On the Divine Humanity* (1933-1945). This article is distinctive in that, whilst it will incorporate material from these mature dogmatic essays, it will principally focus

¹ For a concise overview, see Aristotle Papanikolaou, 'Contemporary Orthodox Currents on the Trinity', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, eds. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 328-38, esp. 328-32. Brandon Gallaher's chapter 'God as Absolute and Absolute-Relative in Bulgakov', in his *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 70-94, is distinctive for going well beyond Bulgakov's major dogmatic trilogy. In book-length treatments of Bulgakov, there are the relevant chapters in Aidan Nichols, *Wisdom from Above: A Primer in the Theology of Father Sergei Bulgakov* (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2005) and Robert Slesinski, *The Theology of Sergius Bulgakov* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017), as well as a brief discussion in Rowan Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 165-67.

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on less well-known Trinitarian texts, which date from the 1920s.² By focussing on these texts, I hope to draw attention to two interrelated and seldom-recognised aspects of Bulgakov's Trinitarian thought. First, his thought on language, developed in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, is central to his interpretation of Trinitarian doctrine: Bulgakov's Trinity is a linguistic—because personal—Trinity. Second, despite Bulgakov's apparent over-confidence in discussing the inner life of the Trinity, his treatment of the subject nonetheless contains a thoroughgoing apophatic tendency.³ These two aspects are interlinked insofar as Bulgakov's understanding of precisely *how* the Trinity transcends thought is rooted in his analysis of the structures of language and personhood: rather than being a docile tool for human use, language outruns our comprehension, in a way that points toward the incomprehensibility of God.

The ambition of this article is thus to advance our understanding of this major figure in twentieth-century theology, by demonstrating how his mature theological work thoroughly depends upon the fruits of his more obscure linguistic investigations. This demonstration will challenge the received picture of Bulgakov as claiming impossible insight into the Trinity and will also upset some of Bulgakov's own explicit conclusions in *On the Divine Humanity*. For if I maintain that his Trinitarian thought is thoroughly apophatic, then I nonetheless contend that the apophaticism that Bulgakov *practices* goes against the apophaticism that he *describes*, particularly as the latter presents the transcendence of God in terms of an alleged transcendence that is proper to the Father alone. Bulgakov's linguistic writings help to apprehend these tensions in his major trilogy and offer immanent solutions to the problems found there.⁴ I thus conclude that Bulgakov's linguistic thought in a sense outruns his explicit articulation of Trinitarian doctrine, presenting resources for thinking about the Trinity that Bulgakov himself does not always exploit.

1. *Language and the Limits of Thought in Twentieth-Century Russian Religious Philosophy*

Why was Bulgakov thinking about language in the first place and what justification is there for the claim that his works on language—one of which was published only in German translation during his lifetime, whilst another was not published at all—hold the key for understanding his Trinitarian thought? Along with many other Russian religious thinkers of the early twentieth century, Bulgakov was caught up in a series of fierce theological debates about language, which are collectively known as the

² Among his untranslated texts, I focus chiefly on 'Chapters on Trinitarity' (first published in two parts in 1928 and 1930). A recent critical edition of the Russian text can be found in Sergii Bulgakov, 'Glavy o troichnosti', in idem, *Trudy o troichnosti*, ed. Anna Reznichenko (Moscow: O.G.I., 2001), 54–180. (Henceforth *GT*). I also discuss his *Tragediia Filosofii* (written in 1920–21), which has recently received an English translation: *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, trans. Stephen Churchyard (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2020). (Henceforth *TP*). For an extended discussion of this work and a critical review of the recent translation, see my 'On Sergii Bulgakov's *The Tragedy of Philosophy*', *Modern Theology* (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12676>.

³ Typical in this respect are the remarks of Paul Gavrilyuk: 'Bulgakov often fails to exercise what may be called apophatic reserve [...] with regard to what could be known or said about the inner life of the Trinity'. 'The Kenotic Theology of Sergii Bulgakov', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58, no. 3 (2005): 251–69 (268).

⁴ Brandon Gallaher has discussed the difficulty of adequately securing the transcendence of God in Bulgakov's work, with reference to Bulgakov's presentation of the Father, in his 'Antinomism, Trinity and the Challenge of Solov'evan Pantheism in the Theology of Sergii Bulgakov', *Studies in East European Thought* 64, no. 3/4 (2012): 205–25, esp. 218–22. Space does not permit me to engage with Gallaher's analysis in depth. Suffice to say that I wholly share his conviction that 'possible resources exist within Bulgakov's own sophiology' that can counterbalance its shortcomings (222).

'imiaslavie' [*name-worshipping*] controversy.⁵ The spark for these debates came with the publication in 1907 of a book entitled *In the Caucasus Mountains*, written by the monk Ilarion (Domrachev).⁶ Hardly a linguistic treatise,⁷ the work is a defense of and practical guide to the practice of the intense repetition of the Jesus Prayer ('Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner'). Yet the insistence in this work on the inseparability of the Name 'Jesus' from the second Person of the Trinity, such that the Name and the One named are identified with one another,⁸ provoked an at times violent polemic. This polemic concerned the particular relationship of the Name of God to God, on the one hand, and the more general relationship of names to their referents, on the other.

Bulgakov, along with several other Russian religious thinkers such as Pavel Florenskii (1882-1937), sided with those who asserted that God is contained and present in the Name. As the debates raged, Bulgakov published two articles defending 'name veneration'⁹ and later formed part of the commission charged with addressing the question of the Name at the 1917-18 All-Russian Church Council.¹⁰ The fruit of Bulgakov's engagement with this controversy and the wider linguistic problems it posed was his *The Philosophy of the Name*, a work largely composed somewhere between 1917 and 1921,¹¹ but unpublished in his lifetime. In this work, Bulgakov presents a picture of reality as inherently linguistic, with language constituting the revelation of the world about itself through human beings, rather than a system of conventional signs. Bulgakov glosses Adam's naming of the animals in Genesis as the animals naming *themselves* in Adam:

⁵ The most extensive account of this controversy outside of Russia is Antoine Nivière's *Les glorificateurs du nom* (Geneva: Syrtes, 2015). A recent, detailed survey of this episode in Russian intellectual history, including its legacy in contemporary Russian religious thought, is Scott M. Kenworthy, 'The Name-Glorifiers (*Imiaslavie*) Controversy', in *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, eds. Caryl Emerson, George Pattison and Randall A. Poole (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 327-42. Also, Naftali Prat, 'Orthodox Philosophy of Language in Russia', *Studies in Soviet Thought* 20 (1979): 1-21, has become something of a classic overview of the theological turn to language in Russia.

⁶ Although as yet untranslated into English, a fine French translation has recently appeared: Hiéromoine Hilarion (Domratchev), *Sur les monts du Caucase*, trans. Dom André Louf (Geneva: Syrtes, 2016).

⁷ As Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk rightly notes in his preface to the French edition, 'the central theme of the book is not a theoretical defense of onomatodoxy [name veneration]' (12).

⁸ As in chapter 27, where we read that 'in reciting the Jesus Prayer with heart and mind [...] the heart actually senses and feels that the Name of Jesus Christ is he himself, our divine Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ, and that it is impossible to separate the Name from the one named'. Translation my own from the Russian original. Available electronically at <https://omolenko.com/biblio/kavkaz.htm>

⁹ 'Afonskoe Delo' ['The Athos Affair'] (1913) and 'Smysl ucheniia sv. Grigoriia Nisskogo ob imenakh' ['The Meaning of Saint Gregory of Nyssa's Doctrine of Names'] (1914), both reprinted in S. N. Bulgakov: *Pro i Contra*, ed. D. Burlak (Saint Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Russkogo Khristianskogo Gumanitarnogo Instituta, 2003), 292-304 and 336-43 respectively.

¹⁰ For Bulgakov's involvement in this council, see Catherine Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 189-218.

¹¹ Precise dating of the work is difficult. Some, such as Robert Slesinski, maintain that the work was produced in 1917, during Bulgakov's work for the All-Russian Church Council (*The Theology of Sergius Bulgakov*, 221). Others favour a later date, namely during his years in Crimea (1918-1922), owing to similarities with his *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, which Bulgakov claims to have written in 1920-21. For an example of this view, see Kenworthy, 'The Name-Glorifiers (*Imiaslavie*) Controversy', 336, and N. Bonetskaia's commentary in Sergii Bulgakov, *Pervooobraz i Obraz*, ed. I. B. Rodnianskaya (Moscow and Saint Petersburg: Isskustvo and Inapress, 1999), vol. 2, 387.

For my part, I suspect that both are right and that the work was written in chunks throughout that period, although largely prior to 1920. The text itself is uneven: some parts seem contemporaneous with *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, but the text mostly approaches language in a Platonic and Palamite idiom that is essentially absent from *Tragedy*, suggesting a fragmented composition. It also famously carries a postscript dated 1942, testifying to the fact that the problem of language occupied Bulgakov until the end of his life.

‘God brought all the animals to Adam, in order to see [...] how they named themselves through him and in him’.¹² Names belong to and reveal their referents, in such a way that the grammatical proposition (Subject-Copula-Predicate/Name) takes on an ontological significance and becomes the structure of created being: the distinction between ‘noun and verb, between subject-ness and predicate-ness [...] flows from the ontology of speech’.¹³ If names thus function as modes of being and acting of that which is named, rather than conventional labels, then the same must be said of the Name of Jesus: Jesus somehow *is* His Name.

In defence of the claim that God in some sense *is* God’s Name, Bulgakov and others drew upon the dogmatic distinction between God’s essence (οὐσία) and God’s energies (ἐνέργεια). The purpose of this distinction is to account for the possibility of relation with and knowledge of God, given God’s transcendence. It received its most formal exposition in the work of the fourteenth-century theologian Gregory Palamas, although the distinction was not without precedent in the earlier patristic tradition.¹⁴ In brief, while God cannot be known in God’s essence, God goes out of Godself¹⁵ and can be experienced and known by creation in the divine energies. While it is possible to make the distinction between the divine essence and energies, it is not possible to say that one is more proper to God than the other: ‘God is in no way diminished in His energies’.¹⁶ Writing of the distinction between οὐσία and ἐνέργεια, Bulgakov himself argues that ‘for the creature, the energy of God *is* also the self-revealing Godhead, *ενεργεια θεος εστιν*’.¹⁷ Within his *The Philosophy of The Name*, we find this distinction mapped onto the constituent elements of the proposition, such that the grammatical subject gestures toward the essence of that which is named, whilst the predicate or name is taken as the subject in its manifestation, or energies: the pronoun ‘expresses by itself the ousia’,¹⁸ whilst ‘a name or phenomenon is the revelation of a thing or noumenon, because in the name its actuality, ἐνέργεια, is made manifest’.¹⁹

Yet what is distinctive about Bulgakov’s engagement with language is that, right from the outset, the proposition is interpreted not just in terms of the essence-energies distinction, but also as a Trinitarian affair. Already in *The Philosophy of the Name*, we find the tripartite structure of the proposition analysed in Trinitarian terms. Each element corresponds to one of the three Persons of the Trinity, such that the structure of finite being bears the mark of its creator: the pronoun or subject is ‘the first hypostasis of being, in which is generated

¹² *Filosofia Imeni [Philosophy of the Name]*, in *Pervoobraz i Obraz*, vol. 2, 26. (Henceforth FI).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁴ The extent to which Palamas’ exposition of the distinction constitutes an innovation, or simply a systematisation of what was already articulated by earlier writers, has long been the subject of debate. For Lossky, Palamas’ presentation is simply a ‘synthesis’ of the thought of earlier Christian writers. See Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, trans. Asheleigh Moorhouse (London: The Faith Press, 1963), 124–37. More recently, Jean-Claude Larchet has similarly maintained that Palamas’ presentation of the divine Energies is in continuity with the preceding patristic tradition in his *La théologie des énergies divines des origines à saint Jean Damascène* (Paris: Cerf, 2010). For a summary and dissenting view of this position, see Andrew Louth’s review of Larchet in *The Journal of Theological Studies* 62, no. 2 (2011): 746–48.

¹⁵ As far as my own writing is concerned, I have sought to avoid using masculine pronouns when referring to God, but have retained them when they occur in citations.

¹⁶ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge and London: James Clarke & Co., 1957), 74.

¹⁷ Sergii Bulgakov, ‘Hypostasis and Hypostaseity: Scholia to *The Unfading Light*’, trans. Anastassy Brandon Gallaher and Irina Kukota, *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 1–2 (2005): 5–46 (23). (Henceforth HH).

¹⁸ FI, 50.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

the second hypostasis, the word, and which, perceiving its bond with this verbal expression [...] accomplishes its third hypostasis [the copula]. It stands to reason that this *eternal generation of the world*, the imprint of trihypostaseity that lies upon the whole of creation, also defines the nature of speech'.²⁰ As I have demonstrated elsewhere,²¹ the suggestion that the proposition be approached in Trinitarian terms is likely to have come from the work of Vladimir Solov'ëv (1853-1900), particularly the sixth of his *Lectures on the Divine-Humanity* (1877-1891).²² There, in a manner redolent of Bulgakov's *The Philosophy of the Name*, Solov'ëv ascribes a propositional structure to being and interprets this structure in terms of the Trinity, with the Father as subject and the Son as predicate.

So Bulgakov's linguistic approach to the Trinity is informed by both the 'linguistic turn' in Russian religious thought in the early twentieth century, as well as his long-standing engagement with the work of Solov'ëv. But if a Trinitarian interpretation of the grammatical proposition is already present in *The Philosophy of the Name*, then it is embryonic. For Bulgakov will only undertake an in-depth study of Trinitarian theology in the 1920s, the early fruits of which are presented in *The Tragedy of Philosophy* (1920-21), whilst the 'Chapters on Trinitarity' (1928-30) display a range and confidence in discussing Greek and Latin approaches to the Trinity that are unmatched in earlier works.²³ Through these works, Bulgakov will refine his understanding of just how finite being has a propositional structure, indeed *is* a proposition, and how this propositional structure should be interpreted in terms of the Trinity. The important advance made in this period is that, whilst in *The Philosophy of the Name* the 'subject' of an (ontological) proposition can be either personal or impersonal,²⁴ by the time we get to *The Tragedy of Philosophy* and 'Chapters' it is the *personal* subject, the *I*, which is the subject *par excellence*.²⁵ The fundamental form of the proposition is not 'A is B', but rather 'I am A'; the proposition is the structure of *personal* life and all creation is—as we shall see—understood as *within*, not beyond, the personal. We might say that in the gap between *The Philosophy of the Name* and *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, Bulgakov has thoroughly 'personalised' his understanding of the proposition and indeed of the Trinity.²⁶ This personalised understanding is presented with singular fullness in 'Chapters' and will be taken for granted in the mature dogmatic works of the 1930s onwards, as when Bulgakov writes that personal consciousness is 'a living I [...] the subject of a certain predicate'.²⁷

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

²¹ What follows on the relation between Bulgakov and Solov'ëv, as well as Bulgakov's 'personalisation' of the propositional schema, is a condensed version of my discussion in 'On Sergii Bulgakov's *The Tragedy of Philosophy*', esp. 5-10.

²² English translation: *Lectures on Divine Humanity*, ed. and trans. Boris Jakim (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1995).

²³ Although 'Chapters' was published for the first time in 1928 and 1930, an article by Bulgakov that was published in 1926 refers to a version of 'Chapters' that is 'ready to be printed'. See his 'Blagodatnye zavety prep. Sergiia russkomu bogoslovstvovaniuu', *Put'* 5 (1926): 3-19 (6).

²⁴ See, for example, *FI*, 52, where Bulgakov describes 'the king' (personal), 'the order' (impersonal) and the 'commander' (personal) in the sentence 'the king sent an order to the commander' as equal 'ontological centres'.

²⁵ *TP*, 16,

²⁶ I suspect that Bulgakov's uncompromising emphasis in *Tragedy* that the *I* is the subject *par excellence*, an emphasis that is not found with the same exclusivity in *Philosophy*, is due to a re-engagement with Fichte in the (brief) time that separates the composition of these works.

²⁷ Sergii Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 89. (Henceforth *LG*). Also *ibid.*, 98, where the Father being the 'cause' of the Son is read as signifying their relation as that of subject and predicate.

Bulgakov's Trinitarian thought, then, was formed in the crucible of his reflections on language, and indeed there are moments in his major dogmatic trilogy that can only be read as abbreviations of fuller discussions in the linguistic-cum-Trinitarian works.

Yet Bulgakov's linguistic works were also the crucible for another dimension of his thought, namely, his critical engagement with German Idealism. In particular, Bulgakov develops in these works a distinctive *critique* of reason, or evaluation of the limits of thought, via a critique of the pretensions of modern philosophy. The motif of the limits of thought runs throughout the German Idealist tradition, beginning with Kant's declaration of intent in his *Critique of Pure Reason* to determine the bounds of reason's legitimate activity: 'reason should take on anew the most difficult of all its tasks, namely, that of self-knowledge, and institute a court of justice, by which reason may secure its rightful claims while dismissing all its groundless pretensions'.²⁸ Kant's subsequent interlocutors will continue to think around this question of reason's limits, as when Hegel contends *contra* Kant that cognition of phenomena and the limits that characterise it must be left behind in the sphere of religion,²⁹ and when Fichte characterises the *I* as an 'infinite striving',³⁰ which comes to knowledge of itself as such in its positing of and confrontation with its limit, the *not-I*.

Bulgakov and his contemporaries inherited this preoccupation with the limits of reason, together with a deep opposition to what they considered the hubristic evaluation of these limits in German philosophy. In their own investigation of reason's legitimate domain, Russian philosophers and theologians continued the tendency of German Idealism—and especially of Kant—to present the experience of reason's limits as a confrontation with contradiction, or 'antinomy'. As has been noted in a recent study, an 'antinomian disposition', or 'philosophical and theological dependence on unavoidable contradiction, paradox or "antinomy"' was a self-conscious element of the work of a good number of twentieth-century Russian thinkers.³¹ Yet Russian philosophy will perform an inversion of the relation between reason and antinomy that characterises, say, the thought of Kant. For the latter, antinomies occur *in extremis*. They act as boundary markers for thought, such that so long as reason does not encounter them, it can be assured that it is operating within its legitimate domain. Yet for this strand of Russian thought, there is no 'safe space', no 'legitimate domain' within which reason can operate without confrontation with antinomies. Instead, all of reason's operations are revealed to be riddled with contradictions.³²

As we will see, this emphasis on reason's inevitable confrontation with contradiction broadly sought to demonstrate the insufficiency of finite reason, indeed finite life, to account for itself. Instead, the lack of self-sufficiency, to which the antinomies of created existence gesture, opens a way for these various Russian religious thinkers to assert the necessary involvement of a transcendent, divine agent in the life of creation. Indeed, the antinomies that characterise created existence are presented as 'anticipating' the

²⁸ *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A xi.

²⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: One Volume Edition, the Lectures of 1827*, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 96-99.

³⁰ J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 231.

³¹ Harry James Moore, 'Antinomism in Twentieth-Century Russian Philosophy: The Case of Pavel Florensky', *Studies in East European Thought* (2020): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11212-020-09378-y>

³² Cf. Moore, who writes that for Russian thought of an 'antinomian disposition', 'the subject must be saturated in an inexhaustible antinomian reality' (7).

antinomies of Christian revelation, and especially the antinomies of the doctrine of the Trinity.³³

What is distinctive about Bulgakov's 'antinomic disposition' is the extent to which it is thoroughly saturated by his engagement with language.³⁴ A recurring theme of his criticism of German philosophy is that Kant and others were blind to the primacy of language: 'Kant's critical scalpel failed to reach the deepest tissue of thought, which is language'.³⁵ If, as we have seen, reality is at root linguistic, then *a fortiori* thought is too. To rightly evaluate the nature and limits of thought, a critical project like Kant's cannot do without an analysis of language and especially its fundamental unity, the proposition, 'I am A'. Indeed, as Bulgakov attends to the proposition, he finds it riven with antinomies that form the focus of his own critique of reason, and which will be analysed in detail below. For now, it need only be said that these antinomies within the proposition define, on the one hand, the limitations of finite existence, the ways in which the created subject cannot account for itself. On the other, they define the eminence of infinite existence, the ways in which the divine subject exceeds the capacities of the creature. In a manner that has surprising resonance with the Trinitarian thought of Augustine, we thus find that an attempt to approach the mysteries of the Trinity must pass through the mysteries of self-consciousness, as these are disclosed in language. An exposition of Bulgakov's approach to the Trinity, including *how* he understands the transcendence of God to creation, ought therefore to begin with his distinctive understanding of self-consciousness, or personhood. It is to this that we now turn.

2. *The Trinity, Causality and Personhood*

It has already been observed that the Trinitarian thought of Sergii Bulgakov does not appear to exhibit a pronounced apophatic dimension. By examining his insistence on the personhood of God, it will become clear that a certain apophasis is in fact rooted in Bulgakov's understanding of personhood. To draw out Bulgakov's distinctive understanding of God as incomprehensible *because* personal, I should like to set him in conversation with one of his most critical contemporaries, Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958). Lossky himself presented his 'recovery' of the apophatic character of Eastern Christianity³⁶ against what he considered the speculative excesses of the Russian religious philosophy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and of Bulgakov in particular.³⁷

The division between Bulgakov and Lossky is all-too-apparent in their respective evaluations of the language of causality when applied to the Trinity. According to

³³ For antinomies of finite existence (horizontal antinomies) 'anticipating' the antinomies of religious revelation (vertical antinomies), see Moore.

³⁴ Although Florenskii will also present language as antinomic, language will not *exhaust* the scope of his antinomic disposition. See Steven Cassedy, 'Pavel Florenskij's Philosophy of Language: Its Contextuality and Its Context', *The Slavic and East European Journal* 35, no. 4 (1991): 537-52, esp. 541.

³⁵ *FI*, 76.

³⁶ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 26.

³⁷ Characteristic is Lossky's reproach that Bulgakov has conflated the plane of the divine essence with that of the divine manifestation. See, for example, his *In the Image and Likeness of God*, eds. John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 90-93. Also, *Mystical Theology*, 80. Yet Brandon Gallaher has demonstrated the *positive* influence of Bulgakov on Lossky's apophaticism in his 'The "Sophiological" Origins of Vladimir Lossky's Apophaticism', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66, no. 3 (August 2013): 278-98.

Lossky, the Cappadocian designation of the Father as the 'cause' of the Son and the Spirit must be interpreted within the negative attitude of Eastern Christian thought.³⁸ In particular, to call the Father the 'cause' of the Son and the Spirit introduces neither process nor inequality into the Trinity,³⁹ since the use of such philosophical terms as 'cause' never intends to provide positive insight by means of analogy. Rather, the Cappadocians subvert the habitual use of such terms to reinforce the incomprehensibility of God. On this reading, it would not make sense to criticise the use of concepts such as 'cause' on the grounds that they are not *suitable*, since any attempt to speak of God involves contravening the meanings of the terms used.

Yet Bulgakov advances just such a critique of the language of causation. He recognises that, in designating the Father as 'cause', the early Christian writers in no way thought that categories proper to creation could be applied to God. But he does not accept that the language of causation is thus justified. He asks of John Damascene's use of the language of causality: 'but what does *causality* signify in this case? [...] If this category of "cause" is to be applied in the doctrine of the Trinitarian monarchy, it must receive its own special philosophical interpretation'.⁴⁰ Likewise with the Cappadocians, their use of the language of causation to emphasise the monarchy of the Father means that 'this important idea [of the Paternal monarchy] remains *speculatively* unclarified in its theological significance'.⁴¹ Clearly Bulgakov does not agree that the 'apophatic attitude' of the Fathers granted them a 'freedom and liberality' in employing 'philosophical terms'.⁴² There remains a need for terms with 'particular philosophical interpretations' and for clear theological meanings. It is against such criteria that Bulgakov evaluates patristic terminology, with 'causation' and other terms like 'procession' deemed inadequate for thinking about God as Trinity.

The suitable language for thinking and speaking about the Trinity is the language of personhood. Bulgakov frequently criticises patristic and medieval approaches to the Trinity and Christology as 'impersonal'. The notion of *hypostasis*, for example, is elucidated by the Cappadocians not in a personal, but in a material sense.⁴³ This is an inevitable consequence of the philosophical milieu of patristic theology, since (Bulgakov maintains) the notion of personhood was alien to the Platonic-Aristotelian conceptual frameworks on which the Fathers drew. Yet God reveals Godself throughout Scripture as personal. The paradigmatic instance of this in the Old Testament is the revelation of God to Moses on Mount Sinai: 'personal consciousness of self is proper to the nature of spirit: "I am that I am," Jehovah, says the Lord'.⁴⁴ This *I*, he continues, 'is a living *I* [...] the subject of a certain objectivity, *the subject of a certain predicate*'. The revelation of God as personal runs throughout the Old Testament, yet is fully achieved in the Incarnation.⁴⁵

With this revelation comes the possibility of speaking about God in terms that work univocally when applied to created reality too: 'God is a hypostasis that has its own nature, and precisely in this sense He is a living personal spirit. Such a definition of

³⁸ Lossky, *Image and Likeness*, 82.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Sergii Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 48. (Henceforth C).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 33. Translation modified; my emphasis.

⁴² The quotes are from Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 42.

⁴³ C, 31.

⁴⁴ LG, 89.

⁴⁵ GT, 65.

personal spirit is applicable to *any* spirit, divine, angelic, or human'.⁴⁶ Returning to the designation of the Father as 'cause' within the Trinity, Bulgakov will parse it by substituting the term 'subject': 'causality in the context of mutual relation signifies [...] *subject*'.⁴⁷ Indeed, with the revelation of the propositional structure of personal life ('the subject of a certain predicate') it becomes possible to articulate without equivocation the nature of the Trinitarian relations: the Father is the subject, who exhaustively realises Himself in the predicate of the Son, with the Spirit being the copula, the act whereby subject and predicate recognise themselves as subject and predicate to one another. Since Bulgakov maintains that such a personalist schema is revealed by God, to use concepts whose domain is impersonal is to invite confusion.

Bulgakov thus seems egregiously insensitive to the apophatic quality of talk about the Trinity. What Bulgakov seems to have missed, and what Lossky insists on, is that the purpose of this talk is not to provide any positive understanding of how God is *in se*. Underlying Bulgakov's apparent misreading of the Cappadocians is therefore the seemingly unsustainable belief that any set of concepts *could* of itself provide positive insight into the Trinity. But is this how the concept of personhood works for Bulgakov? Some brief citations will show that Bulgakov considers the structures of divine personhood to be in fact necessarily incomprehensible.

This incomprehensibility is most explicitly addressed with reference to the Holy Spirit. In one description of the life of the Trinity in *The Comforter* (1936), there is a dizzying heaping up of loves that can be taken as apophatic simply in the disorientation it produces: there is the love of the Father for the Son and vice-versa, which is the Spirit; there is the love of the Father for his love of the Son, i.e., for the Spirit, and vice-versa, *and* there is the love of the Holy Spirit for the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is, moreover, *all* of these loves, 'the very movement of love', and this as a person.⁴⁸ Anticipating the incomprehension that this discussion will provoke, Bulgakov notes that 'human understanding is given the capacity to know these aspects of the being of the Spirit only discursively, by successively passing from one definition to another, for it knows love only as a state or attribute of a hypostasis, not as a hypostasis in itself'.⁴⁹ Indeed, love and created personhood contradict one another, insofar as 'in us, love is the definitive overcoming of the ipseity with which, for us, hypostatic being itself is associated'.⁵⁰ There is, as a result, a 'transcendence of Love', which 'expresses the particular mystery of the Third hypostasis'.⁵¹ One can even say on the basis of this passage that, if God is personal because God is love, then the human is *not* personal. The concept of personhood thus does function negatively. While we can ascribe a structure to the divine life that is shared with human (and angelic) life, we must recognise that any continuity is countered by a lack of coincidence in these same structures.

But how does this make sense? To claim that the language of personhood provides the pre-eminent means of speaking about the Trinity, whilst simultaneously speaking of divine personhood as contradicting created personhood, seems an impossible balancing act. Yet the problem is not as insoluble as it appears, since, for Bulgakov,

⁴⁶ *LG*, 89.

⁴⁷ *GT*, 112.

⁴⁸ *C*, 180 f.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* Translation modified.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

personhood is not primarily a category for speaking of *created* reality. Whereas the movement of the language of causality is from created to uncreated, whence the need for an emptying of concepts, the direction of travel is reversed in the case of personhood: its pre-eminent application is to uncreated reality and it is applied only derivatively to creation. To say that personhood is a model among other possible models drawn from created existence, implying a movement from the clearly understood (human persons) to the less-understood (divine persons), is to miss this important feature of Bulgakov's account. Rather, in the revelation of personhood as obtaining first to God and then to humanity, there is a movement from the perfectly mysterious to the imperfectly mysterious, since our self-knowledge is inherently imperfect: 'the comprehensible is expelled from its last refuge, the self-consciousness of the *I*, and proves to be mysterious and *unintelligible*'.⁵² To conceive of God in personal terms is not, therefore, a domestication of the divine through concepts. Rather, it affirms that the inherent mystery of created personal life finds its source in the mystery of divine personhood.

This is why Bulgakov's criticism of the language of causality does not amount to an insensitivity to the apophatic. Rather, Bulgakov's apophaticism is not defined by the emptying out of a given set of concepts, since we have in personhood an inherent resistance to conceptual mastery. We as persons are a riddle to ourselves, a cryptogram to be deciphered with reference to the revelation of the personal Trinity. To understand this, we need to analyse more fully what Bulgakov understands to be the structure of personal life. In this analysis, it will also become clear how the category of personhood is inherently *linguistic*.

3. *The Linguistic Structures of Personal Life*

'Personal consciousness of self is proper to the nature of spirit: "I am that I am," Jehovah, says the Lord. Spirit is, above all, *personality* as personal consciousness of self, as "I".'⁵³ What is the reasoning implicit in this gloss of Exodus 3? What Bulgakov means when he says that God reveals Godself as personal is not that God says, 'I am a personal God'. Rather, the *form* taken by God's revelation, God's self-revelation as a speaking subject of a given predicate, is what makes this moment a revelation of the personhood of God. That God is personal is not just one thing that God reveals about Godself. Rather, what we learn from the bare fact that God reveals Godself at all is that God is personal and that the structure of personal life is propositional.

When God names Godself to Moses in Exodus, humanity's own personhood is also revealed. God's address to Moses *as an interlocutor* testifies to humanity's status as itself the revelation of God in its personal life: 'the possibility of divine condescension, of a meeting of divine personality with human personality testifies to the real divine likeness'.⁵⁴ We can already venture—on the basis of this propositional, linguistic understanding of personhood—an initial conclusion as to the implications of Bulgakov's personalism for his understanding of language. Language is not, on this account, just one activity among others that characterises human beings. We are instead in the vicinity of approaches to language that consider its expressive or manifesting activity as

⁵² *TP*, 112 f. Translation modified.

⁵³ *LG*, 89.

⁵⁴ *GT*, 64.

constitutive of the speaking subject.⁵⁵ Moreover, insofar as persons realise themselves in language, this self-realisation is necessarily relational. For Bulgakov, personhood or 'spirit' 'is a relation, to God and others and the natural, given environment',⁵⁶ and language is the means for the realisation of that relation. The notion that language is primarily a tool for the progressive acquisition of certain knowledge about 'the world out there' is thus displaced. For to say we grow in our self-understanding as persons through language—and especially through dialogue with a divine interlocutor—is necessarily to say that we become increasingly aware of ourselves as mysterious, and Bulgakov articulates that mystery with reference to the propositional structure of personal life.

There is, first, the tripartite structure of the proposition: subject-copula-predicate. Neither subject nor predicate are themselves without the other. The subject does indeed experience itself in self-consciousness as distinct from all possible objects of consciousness, being instead the condition for the world's disclosure of itself.⁵⁷ The uniqueness and irreducibility of the *I* lie in its nature as self-positing: the *I* gives itself to itself, and while one can talk about a person in terms of, say, their origins, their family history etc., the *I* does not immediately know itself as thus constituted. Self-consciousness is not self-consciousness *as* the child of so-and-so, but simply as *I*, and so 'is not a givenness, but a doing, *actus purus*'.⁵⁸ As such, the *I* cannot be defined in terms of anything else, but can only be indicated 'by a verbal gesture (the pronoun)'.⁵⁹

Yet the subject cannot be 'content' with such a splendid isolation. While its condition as 'self-positing' is what makes the *I* absolute, so long as this self-positing is *bare* self-consciousness then the subject lacks reality, trapped in 'the mirrored cell of its own solitude'.⁶⁰ Although the postulates of a reality beyond self-consciousness are contained within the structure of the subject, 'the world as *reality* is not in [the *I*] [...] only its place is designated within the subject'.⁶¹ Likewise the world 'remains dead and darkened without the sun of the *I* igniting above it'.⁶² In short, their estrangement means that neither *is* itself and the identity of the one must include the other.

So the self-positing of the subject, or the utterance of the *I*, necessarily belongs within the utterance of a proposition, with the *not-I* of the world as the predicate or nature of the subject: 'the *I* in such a case does not merely become *not-I*, but also a certain subject acquires a predicate, the subject receives a name'.⁶³ Bulgakov's point here is that the *I* does not lose its integrity as an *I* in its constitutive relation to the world. The flattening out or dissolution of the *I* in the *not-I* of the world is impossible, since a difference in kind obtains between them, and so the identity between subject and predicate is always an identity-in-difference, with

⁵⁵ Cf. Herbert McCabe, *Law, Love and Language* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 68: 'Man does not just *add* speech on to such things as eating and sexual behaviour; the fact that these latter occur in a linguistic context makes a difference to what they are'. Another contemporary proponent of such a view is Charles Taylor, whose understanding of language as 'constitutive' is expressed succinctly in the third section ('Philosophy of Language') of his *Philosophical Papers. Volume 1: Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁵⁶ Williams, *Sergii Bulgakov*, 170.

⁵⁷ *GT*, 56.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 58. Cf. John Milbank, 'From Grammar to Wisdom', in *TP*, xv.

⁵⁹ *GT*, 56.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

the copula 'to be' signifying the 'miraculous', dynamic act by which such an identity is established and maintained. This act is, in the broadest terms, the 'life' or 'being' of the subject: 'to be, being, an uninterrupted stream of being, *life*'.⁶⁴ Bulgakov will further characterise the predicate of the subject as its 'self-revelation',⁶⁵ with self-revelation synonymous with vital activity: 'life is self-revelation and self-creation even for created spirit'.⁶⁶

With the language of self-revelation comes a certain danger of understanding the subject as constituted by a kind of inner content, *out of which* comes this revelation. Such an impression is not helped by instances where Bulgakov speaks of the subject as revealing itself 'out of an unrevealed state of depth [*glubinnosti*]'.⁶⁷ This language of hidden interiority sits uneasily with the account of 'self-revelation' as 'life', since such language suggests that the subject reveals *what it already is*, as if revelation were a secondary act. The image of the self as constituted primarily by private depth is flatly ruled out by the foregoing, propositional scheme of the life of created subjects,⁶⁸ according to which, confining the subject to the *I* is not quite correct. Instead, the subject is the entire, integral movement of which the three elements of the proposition are the moments: 'three points take shape in the development of the *absolute subject* [*absoliutnogo sub'ekta*]: the subject [*sub'ekt*], the object, and being, subject [*podlezhashchee*], predicate and copula'.⁶⁹ The proposition thus discloses the ecstatic, or, to anticipate Bulgakov's understanding of the Trinitarian subject, the kenotic structure of personal being.

The proposition, then, is the form of the subject's life, and in its structure manifests a Trinitarian principle of identity-in-difference. But there is more to the proposition than this, for that apparently co-ordinating element of the proposition, the grammatical subject, discloses a hidden, triple constitution: 'the *I* knows itself as an *I* only through a *not-I* that this time however is not a predicate [...] but a *not-I* as also *I*, as *co-I*, as *you*'.⁷⁰ While it is possible to posit, if only in abstraction, self-consciousness without a predicate, this bare self-consciousness depends upon and includes other self-positing subjects. As in the case of the *not-I* of the world, Bulgakov attributes such a constitutive role to the *co-I* on the grounds that it confers *reality* [*real'nost'*] upon the *I*. Bulgakov discusses this reality in visual metaphors: in the case of the world, the *I* is able to escape the 'mirrored cell of its own solitude'; in the case of other subjects, the *you* is described as 'the shadow of the *I*', giving it an opacity or solidity: 'a real, non-transparent substance does not exist without a shadow'.⁷¹ Moreover, Bulgakov takes up again the metaphor of mirroring in his justification of why the positing of self-consciousness needs not only a *you*, but also a *co-you*, a *(s)he*. The *I-you* dyad is merely a 'mirroring self-reflection', with the *you* 'limited to a self-reflection of the *I*', such that neither is sufficiently grounded.⁷² This

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 61.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 89.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁸ But we will see how the association of the subject with a hidden depth re-emerges with significant negative consequences in Bulgakov's discussion of the Father in *The Comforter*.

⁶⁹ *GT*, 57. There are three articulations of 'subject' here: there is the 'subject' in the sense of 'self-consciousness', rendered by the Russian loanword '*sub'ekt*'; then there is 'subject' in the grammatical sense, rendered by the calque '*podlezhashchee*' (*pod* – under; *lezhashchii* – lying). These two are given as mapping onto one another. Then there is the 'absolute subject' [*absoliutnogo sub'ekta*], which corresponds to the proposition in its entirety.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 59.

'mirroring' is broken only by the (s)he, who frees both *I* and *you* from a mirroring dyad, by revealing itself as *beyond* the dyad. The (s)he therefore reveals itself as possessing an independent solidity, which in turn affirms the *I* (and *you*). In so doing, this (s)he 'standing in the shadows', 'witnesses to the self-realisation of the *I*, to its reality'.⁷³

In this definition of the subject's reality as dependent upon the *not-I*, we find the hidden centre of Bulgakov's engagement with German Idealism in 'Chapters'. In particular, through his treatment of 'reality', Bulgakov decisively confronts the *Ich Philosophie* [*I Philosophy*] of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) and articulates his own distinct understanding of personal existence.⁷⁴ It might seem strange to locate Bulgakov's engagement with Fichte in the seemingly generic concept of reality, since the influence of the latter is all-too-evident in 'Chapters', through the adoption of Fichte's peculiar manner of speaking about the subject. The very distinction between *I* and *not-I*, which Bulgakov superposes onto the structure of the proposition and so makes constitutive of his understanding of personal existence, owes its origin to Fichte's *Science of Knowledge* [*Wissenschaftslehre*]. So too does the vocabulary with which Bulgakov will clarify the distinction and relation between the *I* and *not-I*: the definition of the *I* as an act of 'self-positing' [*samopolaganie*] and thus as 'absolute', and the description of the *not-I* as a 'limit' [*granitsa*] for the *I*, are as many instances of borrowing from Fichte's vocabulary for speaking about the subject. However, by paying attention to the work done by the concept of 'reality' and especially the attendant language of 'mirroring' and 'reflection', we can see how Bulgakov's borrowing is in no way a slavish imitation, but rather a turning inside-out of the Fichtean subject.

If 'Chapters' assumes the Fichtean vocabulary of subjectivity, then Bulgakov's earlier *Tragedy of Philosophy* is where Fichte's philosophy, together with the work of the other leading lights of German Idealism, is subject to explicit, critical examination. As in 'Chapters', the proposition, or first-person judgement ('I am A'), is taken not merely as the fundamental structure of thought, but as 'a schema of what truly exists',⁷⁵ as 'substance': 'substance is a metaphysical triunity which finds expression in the proposition'.⁷⁶ Through this definition of substance as a tripartite structure, whose elements cannot be deduced one from another, Bulgakov argues that substance will always elude reason and philosophy.⁷⁷ For reason is 'monistic' in its operations; that is, 'the task which human thought naturally and inevitably strives to complete' is 'the reduction of the many and all into one, and, conversely, the deduction of all and many out of one'.⁷⁸ For thought to do this, it must take one of the three 'moments' in the propositional structure of substance and arbitrarily elevate it over the others. In the case of Fichte, his philosophy is, as we know, an '*I Philosophy*', one which—in the terms of Bulgakov's critique—isolates the subject within substance and elevates it above the copula and the predicate.⁷⁹

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ This summary discussion cannot fully address the role of Fichte in Bulgakov's Trinitarian thought. In particular, I am concerned here only with showing how Bulgakov *differentiates* his presentation of the subject from that of Fichte. For an extended evaluation of the influence of Fichte on Bulgakov's thought, see Milbank, 'From Grammar to Wisdom', xi-xxiii.

⁷⁵ TP, 9.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 14: 'Philosophical thought has always looked for a definition of substance without finding one'.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁹ 'The *I*, the philosophical and propositional subject [...] must weave a world, must bring the predicate into being, must posit being'. Ibid., 45.

Within the extensive excursus on Fichte in *Tragedy*, Bulgakov sets apart a significant section that bears the subtitle 'On Reality'.⁸⁰ This section of the excursus contains a quantity of citations from Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* concerning the subject's reality, together with Bulgakov's commentary. In the opening citations of this excursus, Bulgakov draws attention to the fact that Fichte's *I* enjoys a plenitude of reality, which it confers onto the *not-I* of the world: 'the source of all reality is the *I*, for this is what is immediately and absolutely posited. The concept of reality is first given with and by way of the *I*', whereas 'the *not-I*, as such, has no reality of its own'.⁸¹ On Bulgakov's gloss of Fichte, any reality ascribed to the *not-I*, as the basis of the suffering of the *I*, is a necessary, but false, representation.⁸²

Bulgakov's critique of this account of the subject's reality in *Tragedy* is familiar from what we have already seen in 'Chapters'. Bulgakov contests Fichte's presentation of the difference between *I* and *not-I* as a quantitative difference.⁸³ Rather, the difference is qualitative and the irreducibility of the *not-I* to the *I* renders impossible Fichte's attempt to consider the former as posited by the latter.⁸⁴ Fichte's solution to this apparent irreducibility, namely, the assertion of an 'absolute *I*', beyond and as the ground of the 'opposition between the *I* and the *not-I*',⁸⁵ is found equally wanting. For between the self-conscious subject, known only in relation to the *not-I*, and the absolute subject that allegedly stands behind it, there lies an insurmountable gulf: 'how can the *I*-subject ascend above its fatal coincidence with the *not-I*, and cognise every act in the *not-I* as an *I*? How can it observe itself from one side, or look at the world with the eyes of a creator even before his creation?'⁸⁶ Fichte's identification of the *I* as the 'source of reality' is shown to be wanting, insofar as its hypothesis of an absolute subject *prior* to the relation between *I* and *not-I* assumes an impossible point of view.

The origins of this impossible positing of an *I* beyond and prior to the *not-I* lie in the aforementioned 'monism' of reason, its compulsion to reduce 'the many and the all into one'. With Fichte, however, the nature of reason's monism as, in fact, reason's *egotism* becomes explicit. Fichte's '*I* Philosophy' is 'the Luciferian project of constructing the world in one's own image and likeness, out of a bare, abstract hypostasis'.⁸⁷ This is betrayed in what Fichte understands the *I* to gain from the *not-I*, namely, a 'mirror': 'the *I* stands in need of the *not-I*, according to Fichte, not as it might stand in need of its own nature, the possibility of its own life [...] but above all as a *mirror*, in which it can be reflected or "reflect itself"'.⁸⁸ The subject has reality *first*, which it bestows in the positing of the *not-I*, in order that it might have a mirror in the *not-I*. The way toward an apprehension of the truth of the subject and thus of substance lies in debasing such an overreaching picture of the *I* and its reality.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 214-23.

⁸¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 215. Italics in the original.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 218.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 229: 'as a consequence of this "positing" of the *not-I* in the *I* there appears one of the features which [...] constitutes one of its [Fichte's system's] inalienable characteristics: the *quantitative* specification of the relation between the *I* and the *not-I*'.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 46 f. Also on the *not-I* of other subjects: 'the *I* has the property of thinking and perceiving itself in the singular number [...] and from such an *I* to someone else's *I* or to a *you* there is no logical deduction' (216).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 47. We shall return to this discussion of the egotism of reason in the following section.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 226.

In Bulgakov's treatment of the subject's reality in 'Chapters', the sequence is therefore reversed. The subject does not possess reality first, but rather a mirror, the 'mirrored cell of its own solitude', from which it must escape. Mirroring becomes synonymous with *unreality* and only as the *I* comes up against the non-reflective and opaque *not-I* does it find its own reality affirmed. Reality depends upon the assurance of what lies beyond the subject's gaze, upon the (*s*)*he* 'standing in the shadows'. In Bulgakov's hands, what this visual metaphor makes clear is that the reality of the *I* depends upon the inclusion within its identity of the irreducibly different. In the case of the world as *not-I*, this irreducible difference is given in the *qualitative* distinction between self-consciousness and the world. Yet this difference in kind cannot of itself secure the reality of the *I*, for the *I* remains the *only I*, trapped within its self-identity. Whence the need for the subject to include in its identity other, different subjects. In the case of other subjects, where no difference in kind obtains, the presence merely of a *you* is insufficient, since this dyad would be a repetition of the same. Instead, the reality of the *I* comes (in an apparent paradox) with the (*s*)*he* who stands beyond the dyad, and who by virtue of that cannot be a mere mirroring. The 'real subject', Bulgakov writes, is therefore 'a certain unity, a triunity of three persons: the first, second and third (the grammatical mystery of the personal pronoun). [...] By these three is the self-consciousness of the *I*, its self-positing, exhausted'.⁸⁹ We might add that the self-positing of the *I* is exhausted also insofar as, by embracing these two 'kinds' of *not-I*, the *I* exhausts all possible *forms or dimensions of difference*—difference in kind, and difference within the same—and so is exhaustively real.

In such an account of the *I*, we see once again that there is no room for a definition of the subject in terms of privileged interiority. On the earlier account of the subject's reality as dependent upon substantive relation with its predicate, an inaccessible interior can only have a negative value, as a 'mirrored cell'. But more importantly, such a 'mirrored cell' is a chimera. For even in the abstraction of the subject as self-consciousness from its predicate, we do not find an original, empty space or hidden depth. In his analysis of the first-person pronoun, Bulgakov shows that the pronoun is not a gesture 'behind' in any sense at all. Rather, 'I' is the shorthand for a dynamic, relational knot: 'I-You-(S)he', which the *I* cannot be without. The *I-You-(S)he* is therefore not a derivative but primary unity, and Bulgakov expresses this through a reversal of the visual metaphor deployed earlier. If at the beginning of the discussion of the collective nature of the *I*, it was appropriate to describe the *you* as the shadow of the *I*, by the end the individual *I* can claim no such primacy, and instead emerges as 'the shadow of a certain *we*'.⁹⁰ Indeed, this *we* is what Bulgakov will identify as the *noumenal* or transcendent aspect of personhood: 'the nature of the hypostasis in relation to conciliarity [*sobornost'*], its position and self-perception within the all-unity [*vseedinstvo*], [is] a supertemporal act lying at the very boundary of creation'.⁹¹ The 'depth' of the subject, manifest in their life in, and relation to, the world, is thus itself relational.

This interpersonal constitution of the subject is defined by Bulgakov as '*the ontological love* in the *I*, which lives not only in itself, but in the *you* and (*s*)*he*'.⁹² Here we find the pre-eminent name of God for Bulgakov, 'love', given as the basis of the created subject, whose life is 'a ray of the single source of Life, the Living God'.⁹³ Having asserted earlier

⁸⁹ *GT*, 60.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁹¹ *TP*, 117. Translation modified.

⁹² *GT*, 60.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 89.

that the human intelligence cannot know God insofar as love as a principle of identity contradicts created personhood, it is now unclear how Bulgakov can justify ascribing such a limitation to thought and language.

4. Fragmenting Personhood and the Incomprehensibility of God

On the preceding analysis, the identity of the created subject has been shown to be the product of a continuous, ecstatic act, whose basic form is given in the structure of the proposition. In this act, an identity-in-difference is established between the *I* and what is *not-I*: the *not-I* of the world, which becomes the subject's predicate, or nature, and the *not-I* of other subjects. This model of identity, which is disclosed in the basic linguistic form by which the subject expresses and enacts this identity, is taken as having its ground in the Trinity. This model is thus described by Bulgakov as an 'ontology of love'.

However, throughout his analysis of the inclusion of the *not-I* within the identity of the *I*, Bulgakov speaks of the *not-I* of the world and other subjects as simultaneously 'limits' for the *I*. While both the world and other subjects are necessary conditions for the subject's self-positing, neither are included in it. Rather, the subject encounters both forms of the *not-I* as *given*, or as *facts*, such that although the created subject knows itself to be *absolute* insofar as it gives itself to itself, as *actus purus*, it also finds itself to be limited, or *relative* in its self-positing. A dichotomy opens up within the subject between the act of the *I* in its self-positing and the givenness or fact of the *not-I*, and the *I* thus experiences itself as inherently contradictory.⁹⁴ While both the world and other subjects are constitutive of the *I*, the *I* is also isolated from and limited by them; the *I* knows itself as an *individual* in relation to both.

The estrangement between the *I* and the world is a function of their differing relations to time. Insofar as the *I* is *actus purus*, a single, unbroken act which for itself has neither beginning nor end, Bulgakov argues that the *I* 'is not subject to time, for it is above time'.⁹⁵ The world, however, is becoming in time: 'time is the most general form of created being'.⁹⁶ This being in time is what makes creation a multiplicity, and while this multiplicity forms an organic whole, nonetheless the successive, discrete emergence of the world constitutes the peculiar form of its givenness for the *I*. Since the world is the nature of the *I*, its predicate, the *I* knows itself as at once eternal and temporal, as *act* and as *fact*. Its realisation of itself through identification with the world, its *life*, is becoming: 'living, the *I* becomes (wird), and this becoming is the law of its life. The life of the *I* is, in this sense, a constant emergence'.⁹⁷ As a result, the unity of the subject's self-positing decomposes into a succession of isolated *states*,⁹⁸ such that the subject undergoes, rather than enacts, its own self-positing: 'in created spirit these moments are accomplished in the personality, but not personally, as states of personal life'.⁹⁹

The discursive nature of human reason flows from the way in which the act of the *I*'s self-positing is limited by the givenness of the *not-I*. The givenness of the world as successive *becoming* defines the subject's own life as becoming, fragmenting the unity of the

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹⁶ *LG*, 132.

⁹⁷ *GT*, 83.

⁹⁸ 'With respect to this self-definition of spirit in the life of the monohypostatic subject, although the trinity of its moments essentially remains, they are accomplished in a temporal process'. *Ibid.*, 93.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

I's self-positing. As a result of this fragmentation, thought takes the form of a successive passing from one discrete entity to another, unable to apprehend the unity of which these discrete units are a part. This in turn grounds the incomprehensibility of the Trinity, insofar as the latter constitutes a *triunity*: 'human thought is fated to successively stop first at the unity, and then at the Trinity [...] this successiveness is merely the limitation of our empirical consciousness, which has to do with isolated objects'.¹⁰⁰ Since the atomisation of the world in time seems to be simply what it means for the world to be created,¹⁰¹ our inability to apprehend the Trinity as triunity, by virtue of the successive, discursive nature of reason, would then simply be correlative to our being creatures.

However, Bulgakov argues in 'Chapters' that this apprehension of the world as a collation of discrete entities is not simply a function of what it means to be in time. Rather, Bulgakov argues that 'in the unity of the object is reflected the unity of our "transcendental consciousness"; unity is the mirror of our mono-hypostatic *I*'.¹⁰² Thus the subject apprehends the world as a unity of discrete entities because of the *subject's* apprehension of itself as an *individual* in relation to other subjects. The atomisation of the world is a product of the relation of the *I* to the *not-I* of other subjects. Insofar as the *I* finds itself limited by and isolated from the other as an individual, or insofar as the *ontological love* in the subject is met with a corresponding *ontological egotism*,¹⁰³ this individuality or atomisation is reflected in their apprehension of the *not-I* of the world.

Yet here we enter into difficulty, for Bulgakov often speaks of the individuality of the created subject, its mono-hypostaseity, as a product of the Fall. He associates created spirit's conflation of the absolute and mono-hypostaseity with the sin of Lucifer.¹⁰⁴ More significant are those moments when Bulgakov presents the atomisation of the created world as the result of a satanic temptation toward self-assertion, such that 'creaturely egotism [...] expresses itself through mutual opacity in space'.¹⁰⁵ In this respect, the application of the category of number to the Trinity is not so much the result of the limitation of created reason *qua* created, but instead 'related only to the incapacity and limitation of *our fallen world and the egocentric character* of our being'.¹⁰⁶ The question arises as to whether the discursive quality of human reason, and thus the incomprehensibility of the Trinity as love, is inherent in reason's being a *created* faculty, or is instead the result of the Fall. More broadly, this apparent tension in Bulgakov's treatment of human reason chimes with a wider ambiguity in his thought, whereby Christ's work of redemption can sometimes appear to be concerned with overcoming the limitations inherent in creatureliness *per se*. This is particularly apparent in the description in *The Lamb of God* of the 'historical Golgotha' as the consequence of the 'metaphysical Golgotha' that is the Logos' self-crucifixion in *time*.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁰ This passage from *C* is regrettably omitted, along with a quantity of other pages, from the English translation. This translation is my own, from *Uteshitel'* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1936), 85.

¹⁰¹ *LG*, 132: 'In creating the world, God created time and temporality; this is precisely contained in the concept "created".'

¹⁰² *GT*, 74.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 96: 'A certain ontological egoism is proper to our *I*: its very being is linked to this self-positing and self-assertion: *I - I*'.

¹⁰⁴ *HH*, 18.

¹⁰⁵ *LG*, 148. Translation modified.

¹⁰⁶ *Uteshitel'*, 85. This passage is also omitted from the English translation.

¹⁰⁷ *LG*, 232.

Whatever the ultimate cause of the diremption of the created subject between *I* and *not-I*, between act and givenness, it is such that the 'ontological love' identified by Bulgakov in created personhood is met with an 'ontological egotism'. This ontological egotism is the cause of a pervasive fragmentation of the synthetic unity of human life. The incomprehensibility the Trinity is a function of that fragmentation.

5. *The Trinity and the Absolute*

With respect to this *frustration* of unity between the *I* and the *not-I*, language can be said to exceed the speaking subject. For language in its most basic form, the proposition, assumes the very unity that the subject's identity as individual excludes. As a result, self-knowledge takes the form of irreconcilable antinomies, such that human persons cannot rationally *make sense* of themselves, and this lack of reconciliation is revealed through analysis of the structure of the proposition. But this does not end in despair. Rather, the frustration of self-knowledge announced in language is also the announcement of humanity's status as made in the *image* of God. In the proposition, we are confronted by the riddle of human life, and the solution to this riddle is found in the Trinity: '[the I] becomes an authentic, real *I* only by looking at the divine *I*, by knowing themselves as the image, the reflection of the Divine sun'.¹⁰⁸ The antinomies of human self-understanding, or the ways in which human persons find themselves at once constituted and limited by the world and others, are therefore endowed with a positive value. For they are interpreted as signs of humanity's status as an *imago Trinitatis*, they gesture toward the Trinity as the revelation of the transcendent context that created life takes for granted in its fundamental operations.¹⁰⁹

In the Trinity, all givenness is excluded and by extension so is any presence of difference as external to the *I*, as *not-I*, since the self-positing of the divine subject is wholly actual. This self-positing is that of the divine subject as tri-hypostatic, in which the self-definition of the *I* through the other does not involve a leap beyond the *I*, but rather 'the *I* becomes other for itself within its own bounds': 'the *I* grounds itself, asserts itself as *I*, *You*, (*S*)*he*, *We*, all the while remaining *I*'.¹¹⁰ Crucially, the triunity of the Godhead is not parcelled out here among the Persons and the nature, with the former being a principle of diversity, and the latter a principle of unity. Indeed, such a tendency in Trinitarian theology is, for Bulgakov, an attempt by discursive reason to render the Trinity comprehensible, by separating the antinomy of triunity. Instead, the Trinity, as the 'Absolute Subject' toward which created subjectivity gestures, is both three and one by virtue of its being an act of *love*, at once fulfilling and surpassing the postulates of human reason: 'in trihypostaticity, the Absolute Subject is manifested as the Living God, since love in the depths of the Subject himself is life in itself, which the monohypostatic spirit does not know. The trihypostatic spirit is incomprehensible to him. The life of the trihypostatic Godhead is a mystery to all creation'.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ *GT*, 66.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Rowan Williams' account of natural theology as 'the recognition that a faithful description of the world we inhabit involves taking account of whatever pressures move us to respond to our environment by gesturing towards a context for the description we have been engaged in [...] *without which our 'normal' repertoire of practice would not finally make sense*'. *The Edge of Words* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 14. My emphasis.

¹¹⁰ *GT*, 80.

¹¹¹ *HH*, 21.

Yet 'trihypostaticity is not only the love of the Three to one another but also the love of God for himself, as of the trihypostatic subject to his self-disclosure'.¹¹² In these two loves, we have Bulgakov's interpretation of the distinction between the Divine essence and energies, the transcendent and immanent in the Trinity. The first love, that of 'the Three for One Another', the *act* of their mutuality, is for Bulgakov precisely the essence or *ousia*, as the transcendent in the Godhead, inaccessible to created spirit in its egocentricity. In keeping with his analysis of created subjectivity, we find no hidden interiority behind the divine subject. Instead, what is inaccessible is the fullness, the substantiality of relation without remainder. Meanwhile, 'this love of God is not only the pre-eternal act of life but also its content',¹¹³ and this content is what Bulgakov would want to see in the Palamite *energeia*, as the manifestation of what God is to God: the divine predicate. Bulgakov is at pains to emphasise that this self-revelation, or manifestation, is not a movement *ad extra*. Rather, it remains internal to the life of the Trinity and is indeed inseparable from the triune act of self-positing: act and content are 'indivisibly united between themselves; and in that unity also is contained the ground of the revelation of God to the creation, of the transition from the transcendental to the immanent'.¹¹⁴ Bulgakov presents this coincidence in terms of the unity of a speech act in its dual aspect as utterance and meaning: 'The begetting of the word from the depths of the spirit is, on the one hand, the utterance, the expression of thought, the act of the word, but it is also the birth of the thought itself in its content, the word, not only as an act, but as meaning or fact'. 'In the begetting of the Son the Father declares himself in him, but in this same begetting is elucidated also the content of the Divine Word, the Wisdom of the Father in the Son'.¹¹⁵ Thus *Divine Wisdom, or Sophia, is the predicate of the tri-hypostatic subject, is love as the content, the repeatable pattern of the mutual self-positing of the persons, on the basis of which God will create. Here we have the coincidence in a single act of the tri-hypostatic positing of the Absolute subject as I-I-I, of love as ousia, and the realisation or manifestation of the nature as Sophia. God names Godself: 'I (Love) am Sophia (Love)'*.¹¹⁶

In this divine act of self-naming there is a perfect unity of Persons with one another and with nature. Each Person is understood as a form of love, a peculiar kenosis or self-definition that depends upon the other Persons for its enactment: 'the bond of the Holy Trinity is the bond of love, indeed of tri-hypostatic love, *three forms of love*, which are essentially the *τρόποι τῆς ὑπαρξεως* of the three hypostases'.¹¹⁷ Paternity is defined as 'the form of love in which the lover desires to have himself not in himself but outside himself'.¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, 'if the Father desires to have Himself outside Himself, in the Son, the Son too does not desire to have Himself for Himself: He offers His personal selfhood in sacrifice to the Father, and being the Word, he becomes mute for Himself'.¹¹⁹ Just as the self-definition of the Spirit as love is such that human reason cannot attain it, so too does every kenotic self-definition of the Persons possess the same incomprehensibility: 'unfathomable for the creaturely spirit is this *begetting* of the Son by the Father,

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 21.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 22.

¹¹⁶ See *LG*, 104, on the proposition 'God is Sophia'.

¹¹⁷ *C*, 65. Translation modified.

¹¹⁸ *LG*, 98.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 99.

of Personality by Personality'.¹²⁰ We have here what can be termed an apophysis of the Trinitarian relations,¹²¹ wherein that which is transcendent to human speech and thought is indeed *love*, the primacy of relation in identity. Yet insofar as language is always expressing or reaching for such identity-in-relation or unity-in-difference, the Trinity surpasses language not as its negation, but rather as its fulfilment.

But this statement of Bulgakov's Trinitarian apophaticism comes up against a crucial element of Bulgakov's explicit reflection on apophysis: the transcendence of the Father. For in the above citations, in which Bulgakov describes the life of the Trinity as a speech act or as a self-naming, God the Father stands in the place of the subject. Elsewhere, Bulgakov will argue that the Father enjoys a unique transcendence even *within* the Trinity, by virtue of this status as subject. How does this square, indeed can it be reconciled, with the transcendence proper to all of the Persons, by virtue of their kenotic self-definition, for which I have argued?

6. *The Father and the Absolute*

In his discussions of the peculiar 'invisibility' of the Holy Spirit, Bulgakov distinguishes it from what he considers to be a transcendence proper to the Father. He articulates this difference with respect to creation in terms of the differing 'silences' of the Father and the Spirit in the world. The silence of the Spirit is a 'hearing and perceiving silence, in which the Word born from all eternity is born again'; a silence which therefore nonetheless signifies a presence of the Spirit in creation. It is thus distinguished from 'the absolute, transcendent Silence of the Father, who is revealed only outside Himself, in the other hypostases, and who in this sense is not in the world'.¹²² Moreover, Bulgakov does not intend this silence of the Father to be understood as pertaining only to a 'manifesting economy' of the Trinity to creation, for this notion of the Father as standing *outside* of His self-revelation is one that Bulgakov establishes in *The Comforter* with respect to the immanent Trinity as well. When discussing the peculiar kenosis of the Spirit as the *copula* within the Trinity, Bulgakov argues that the 'invisibility' that results from this kenosis is distinct from the transcendence proper to the Father as *subject*: 'It [the third hypostasis] is not the transcendent Paternal hypostasis; the latter remains outside of revelation, as the subject of revelation'.¹²³ What is implied is a transcendence and thus an apophysis that rest not on the mutual inherence of the Persons, but on a distinction between the hypostases within the Trinity itself.

The Epilogue to *The Comforter* is devoted to establishing this transcendence proper to the Father. Bulgakov begins with what seems like a mere re-statement of his understanding of God as the 'Absolute-Relative', at once transcendent to and immanent in creation, which he articulated first in *The Unfading Light* (1917) and subsequently refined in *The Lamb of God*: 'the Transcendent never remains only in its transcendence, but has a *trans*, which not only conceals but also defines it. In other words, the Absolute itself is *relative* in its absoluteness, just as the Transcendent is immanent in its

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹²¹ Cf. Rowan Williams, 'The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure', in *Silence and the Word*, eds. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 115-35 (esp. 115-26).

¹²² *C*, 199.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 188.

transcendence'.¹²⁴ This is the basis of the distinction between apophatic and cataphatic theology, as 'the NO of apophatic theology is necessarily connected with a certain YES of cataphatic theology'.¹²⁵ If the transcendent remains transcendent in relation to the immanent, then this 'signifies only that between them there does not exist any equality or adequacy', with negative theology standing as a constant reminder to positive theology of this inadequacy.¹²⁶

This is the relation in which the Trinity stands to creation, at once transcendent to and yet revealing itself in the world. 'This revelation of the Absolute in the world, however, is such that it presupposes the self-revelation of the Absolute within itself'.¹²⁷ As Bulgakov goes on to say, 'the being of the Transcendent is an absolute relation within the Absolute Itself, or the Holy Trinity'. In other words, the Transcendent-Immanent relation that obtains between God and creation is absolutised in or even as the Holy Trinity, in a distinction between the self-revealing hypostasis of the Father and the revealing hypostases of the Son and Spirit. The Father is the 'hypostasis that is revealed, the hypostatic Divine Depth and Mystery, the Divine Subject of self-revelation', and even if there is an 'absolute adequacy' between Him, and the Son and Spirit, the latter two can nonetheless be termed 'revealing or cataphatic, so to speak, hypostases'.¹²⁸ Bulgakov sees this qualitative distinction of the Father as the apophatic, transcendent hypostasis as flowing from the linguistic, propositional nature of the Trinity, in which the Father is the subject.

Already in 'Hypostasis and Hypostaseity' (1925), there is the suggestion that Bulgakov holds the Father to be the eminently apophatic person of the Trinity. Indeed, there he implies that the distinction between Father and Son is parallel to that between the unknowable essence and the manifesting energies of God.¹²⁹ But in his survey of patristic Trinitarian theology in *The Comforter*, Bulgakov shows himself aware of the dangers of associating the Father exclusively with the *ousia* and demonstrates that a number of early Christian writers who considered the Father eminently mysterious or apophatic did so on the basis of a subordinationism. In Tertullian, Bulgakov observes that the differentiation of the Persons according to decreasing degrees of substance has as a consequence the assertion of the 'invisibility of the Father and the visibility of the Son'.¹³⁰ Meanwhile, in Origen 'plenitude, or *ousia*, properly belongs to the Father, who, Himself being unknowable and transcendent, reveals Himself in the Son and also in the Spirit'.¹³¹ What this quote suggests is that Bulgakov can at least appreciate a subordinationism like the one he sees in Origen,¹³² to the degree that it seeks to account for the possibility

¹²⁴ Ibid., 360.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 360 f.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 361.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 364. One even detects in the French translation of *The Comforter* by Constantin Andronikov, an erstwhile disciple of Bulgakov, a squeamishness concerning this designation of the Son and Spirit as 'cataphatic' persons. The Russian original reads 'существуют Открывающие, так сказать, катафатические ипостаси Слова и Духа', with this 'так сказать' best rendered as a neutral 'so to speak', or 'pour ainsi dire' in French. Andronikov, however, gives 'si j'ose ainsi dire', 'if I may [lit., dare] say so', supplying a circumspection that is not present in the original.

¹²⁹ *HH*, 17. See also *LG*, 116, on the transcendence of the Father *qua* subject, vis-à-vis His predicate.

¹³⁰ *C*, 14.

¹³¹ *Utshitel'*, 40, n. 1. My translation; this section is omitted in *C*.

¹³² It should be noted that such a subordinationism on the part of Origen is disputed. See Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, 'Origen's Anti-Subordinationism and its Heritage in the Nicene and Cappadocian Line', *Vigiliae Christianae* 65 (2011): 21-49.

of divine revelation given divine transcendence: 'such an assertion of the total transcendence of the Divinity is, however, logically overcome in Neoplatonism and Origenism by subordinationism, which makes possible the transition from apophysis to cataphasis'.¹³³ The question becomes how to secure the transition from the apophatic to the cataphatic and so affirm the possibility of divine self-revelation, a possibility that allegedly depends upon recognising the proper 'monarchy' of the Father, whilst avoiding an 'ontological subordinationism'.

The articulation of the structures of personhood, Bulgakov argues, provides just such a solution. On the one hand, the hierarchy of Persons is given within the unified, propositional act of personal life: the Father as subject, the Son as predicate, the Spirit as copula. According to this scheme, each possesses the nature differently, yet the nature is not divided in this differentiation, as the act of self-revelation, the life, is one. On the other hand, since personal self-consciousness is always a triune self-consciousness as *I-You-(S)he*, the equality of the hypostases is secured *prior* to any concrete determination of the hypostases according to their mode of possessing the divine nature, i.e., as subject, predicate and copula.¹³⁴ Here Bulgakov reckons himself able to argue that the Father, as revealing subject, constitutes 'the Transcendent even within the Trinity', whilst respecting the equality of the Persons: 'this distinction between transcendent and immanent principles within the Divinity itself [...] is not a natural and ontological one, insofar as all the hypostases are equally divine, but a hierarchical one'.¹³⁵ The test of this claim is whether Bulgakov's articulation of the Father as the transcendent, revealing subject within the Trinity is in fact congruous with his articulation of the nature of the subject elsewhere.

A major challenge to any claim for such congruity comes in the presentation of God as Absolute-Relative in the Epilogue to *The Comforter*. For in isolating the Father as the Transcendent, or Absolute within the Absolute-Relative antinomy, Bulgakov seems to abandon the strictly Trinitarian character of his understanding of the Absolute Subject. In 'Chapters', God is the Absolute Subject because God is the Trinity, in which all difference as limit or boundary is surmounted by the tri-hypostatic self-positing of the divine subject: the Absolute Subject 'must be everything required for its existence. The Absolute *I* must be in itself and for itself Absolute *You* and Absolute *(S)he*, it must also be in itself and for itself Absolute *We* and *You*. [...] The Absolute Subject is the Tri-hypostatic Subject'.¹³⁶ To be *absolute* is to be *triune* and thus when Bulgakov writes of God as the Absolute-Relative in *The Lamb of God*, who creates and enters into relation with creation out of the necessity of love, he can only be talking about the 'whole' Trinity as at once Absolute and Relative.¹³⁷ After all, the pattern of love presented in *The Lamb of God* as constitutive of the act of creation, i.e., the Absolute's realisation of itself beyond the limits of itself, is precisely the pattern of love as the surmounting of difference-as-limit that we find in Bulgakov's account of the tri-hypostatic self-positing of the *I*.

In the Epilogue to *The Comforter*, such a Trinitarian understanding of the Absolute seems to remain: 'God, in the Holy Trinity, is the Absolute and Transcendent in relation

¹³³ *Utshitel'*, 40.

¹³⁴ Bulgakov first makes this argument in *GT*, 70: 'tri-hypostaseity logically precedes the definition of individual hypostases in the concrete correlation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit'.

¹³⁵ *C*, 379. Translation modified.

¹³⁶ *GT*, 68. See also *HH*, 20: 'the one absolute subject manifests this absoluteness of his own in an act of mutual love of Three; thereby overcoming the limitedness of *I*'.

¹³⁷ *LG*, 119-23.

to the world'.¹³⁸ Yet by the end of the Epilogue, the qualities of transcendence and immanence have been clearly parcelled out among the Persons, such that the Absolute is the Father: 'God in the proper and distinct sense is precisely God the Father, Who transcendently abides in heaven, whereas the Son and the Holy Spirit are united with us on earth. They are in the world, being transcendent-immanent to it, whereas the Father is transcendent, higher than the earth, in the heavens above the earth'.¹³⁹ But to divide up the absolute and relative among the Persons of the Trinity in this way does not seem possible on Bulgakov's own account of the Trinity as Absolute Subject. For this absolute quality flows from the surmounting of difference-as-limit that is achieved by the *trinity* of the Persons, and so cannot be ascribed to one Person in particular without jeopardising the very notion of the subject that Bulgakov has so meticulously elaborated.

A possible solution to this lies—in an apparent paradox—in the earlier identification of the transcendent within the Trinity, the *ousia*, as the *act* of love by which the Persons posit themselves through and for the Others.¹⁴⁰ How can such an understanding be reconciled with the Father's alleged, peculiar transcendence? Only if such a transcendence is interpreted as the exhaustive realisation of the Father in the hypostases of the Son and the Spirit, in such a way that there is nothing peculiar to the Father that can be held onto *apart* from the other Persons. The Father's transcendence would in this sense be synonymous with what Bulgakov identifies as His peculiar kenosis, his 'muteness from all eternity, for He speaks Himself only in the Son'.¹⁴¹ Transcendence would here assume the opposite of its habitual meaning: it would not designate 'something more' that remains inaccessible, but a perfect adequacy between subject and predicate, such that 'Father' names nothing but 'Son' and 'Spirit'.¹⁴² Contemplation would then follow the course of a Möbius strip, as the putative movement of ascent to the Father becomes, not an endless sounding of paternal depth, but a circular return to Son and Spirit.¹⁴³

Yet Bulgakov uses just such a language of 'hiddenness' and 'interiority' to characterise the transcendence of the Father in the Epilogue. The absence of the term *ousia* in the Epilogue as a means of characterising this hiddenness or depth is noteworthy in this respect and can perhaps be explained by Bulgakov's determination to avoid the re-introduction of an impersonal Absolute into the Trinity. From the outset of the Epilogue, Bulgakov emphasises the thoroughly personal nature of the Christian Absolute, against the insinuation of an impersonal *Urgottheit* as the highest principle of Divinity.¹⁴⁴ Such a personalist emphasis would be weakened by a prioritisation of substance over personhood, such as could occur if the Father's transcendence was made a function of his

¹³⁸ C, 361.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 390. Elsewhere in this section of the Epilogue, Bulgakov explicitly says that the 'Absolute is the Father'.

¹⁴⁰ A similar definition of the transcendent dimension of created personhood as constitutive relation was also shown to obtain in 'Chapters' and *The Tragedy of Philosophy* in a way that refuses a definition of transcendent substance in terms of an inaccessible, hidden *quantum*.

¹⁴¹ C, 191.

¹⁴² Milbank presents a positive reading of Bulgakov's writings on the Father in 'From Grammar to Wisdom', esp. xxiv: 'He is only an absolute Paternal hypostasis because he is also Filial and Spiritual subjectivity'. Here Milbank presents the Father as exhaustively realised in the Son and Spirit, an understanding that is—I allege—present elsewhere in Bulgakov's work but contradicted in the Epilogue to *The Comforter*.

¹⁴³ The image of the Möbius strip is taken from Rowan Williams, 'What Does Love Know? St. Thomas Aquinas on the Trinity', *New Blackfriars* 82, no. 964 (2001): 260-72 (263).

¹⁴⁴ C, 359 f.

possessing the *ousia*. Yet for all that Bulgakov avoids the term, the Father is nonetheless described in such a way as to make his transcendence a function of possessing the divine nature as a depth proper to Him alone. Thus, if Sophia, or the 'Divine-Humanity', is the self-revelation of the Father, then the Father 'is the Divine-Humanity which is not manifested, which is hidden and mysterious, but which is becoming manifested in divine self-revelation'.¹⁴⁵ Later in the Epilogue, this equation of the Father with the 'innermost Divinity' is even more explicit, as the Son and the Spirit venerate Him 'as the most hidden Divinity, *living within Himself*'.¹⁴⁶

It seems impossible to make sense of such a picture of the Father as the Divinity *living within Himself* according to Bulgakov's own account of the life of the person, which is a) always inter-hypostatic; and b) synonymous with the act of revelation. Self-revelation is not—as has already been demonstrated—a representation or showing to others of what or who the revealing subject already is in themselves, but the subject's being who they are. In this respect, what is not revealed is not. How can such an account of revelation accord a positive valence to the language of hiddenness, or even make sense of the language of *possession* of the hidden or non-revealed, let alone make it the distinguishing feature of one of the divine Persons? Bulgakov himself argues this point forcefully in the Epilogue with respect to created subjects, where the inadequacy of phenomena to the noumenon that they reveal is the hallmark of creaturely limitation, signifying a capacity for life that cannot be fully realised.¹⁴⁷ Bulgakov therefore writes that 'in the depths of the Holy Trinity, in God and for God, there is therefore no place for any mystery, in the sense of an inadequacy in the self-revelation of the Father'; 'the Divine Predicate, the Word, is absolutely adequate to the Divine Subject'.¹⁴⁸

Yet in the very same Epilogue, Bulgakov will write of the Son and Spirit as the recipients of the revelation of the Father's Divinity as if apart from them: 'both revealing hypostases have *before Them [pred soboi]* the Father revealing Himself to them in his Divinity, not only as Father, but as God'.¹⁴⁹ It seems right to suggest on the basis of this tension that there is a ghostly separation of the Person of the Father from the single act of generation and spiration, from the particular kenotic act that is constitutive of Fatherhood.¹⁵⁰ For insofar as each of the Persons *is* a Person through their particular kenosis, the form of love that they are, all three are equally subjects, who realise themselves in the others. There is, in the attempt to distinguish the Father by a certain 'hidden' quality of the divine nature, an unacknowledged—indeed denied—self-positing of the Father *apart* from and prior to this kenosis. This undermines Bulgakov's insight into the dangers of conceiving of the subject as a privileged interior, through the re-introduction of a *mauvais* transcendence into the Godhead, which surely cannot be anything other than the kind of 'ontological subordinationism' that Bulgakov is at pains to avoid.

In short, it would appear that Bulgakov's characterisation of the Father as the transcendent, apophatic Person within the Trinity is untenable by Bulgakov's own criteria. Insofar as Bulgakov presents this peculiar transcendence as flowing from the Father's status as subject within the proposition that is the Trinity, this untenability may be thought to extend to the very belief that the Trinity is to be apprehended in linguistic

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 366.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 379.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 360 f.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 364. Translation modified.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 378. Translation modified.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 367: 'Fatherhood is synonymous with self-renunciation, with self-revelation in others'.

terms. However, as I hope the foregoing analysis has shown, the 'subject' as Bulgakov seems to understand it in the Epilogue is not congruous with his earlier, more explicitly linguistic, Trinitarian work. Rather, it represents a deviation from some of the most important insights of that work and is even at odds with other elements of his writings on the Father, insofar as it reinstates a conception of the subject as constituted by an interiority that is prior to relation. In this respect, the challenge that Bulgakov set himself, namely to reconceive the 'monarchy' of the Father in the light of his linguistic understanding of the Trinity, remains. Moreover, the apophasis that Bulgakov articulates with respect to the Father in the Epilogue is not, I argue, congruous with the apophasis, the experience of the limits of thought and language in the face of the divine, that we find to be actually at play across Bulgakov's texts. This apophasis remains one of the unfathomable, constitutive interrelation of the Persons, a love that, while it surpasses language, does so as its consummation, rather than its negation.

7. Conclusion

'Does the way we talk as human beings tell us anything about God?'¹⁵¹ Sergii Bulgakov certainly thought so. God not only gives the Divine Name to human beings, but also calls *them* by name (Isaiah 43:1) and so summons them to the union-in-dialogue that is prayer. Yet this is the same God who 'dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see' (1 Timothy 6:16). This problem of the possibility of encounter with God in language, raised with particular acuity in the early twentieth century in Russia, was—for Bulgakov—the centre of the Christian doctrine of God. Bulgakov grasped that to give one's name, to be-in-relation, was not accessory to, but rather the very movement of personal life. So the subject's introspection becomes a turning inside out, as the *I* finds itself to be the 'shadow of a certain *we*'.¹⁵²

But as we attend to the structure of our life in language, we find ourselves estranged from this mutuality, or love, that is both the condition and fulfilment of personal life, by the being-in-isolation of the creature. Finite life thus cannot account for itself; it requires—and the structure of its life becomes—the sign of an interlocutor who gives creation its name in order to receive it back. This interlocutor is the Trinity, in whose life those structures of constitutive relation, which simultaneously define and elude the creature, find their prototype. The determination of the Persons through one another, love as *act*, is the divine *ousia*, inaccessible to created consciousness in its isolation. But in this same act, the Triune Subject beholds the reality of this love as its content, as its life; the Triune Subject names itself to itself, as *Love-Sophia*. And God gives this name to creation too, as the end to which our life in, nay *as*, language tends. 'What we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is' (1 John 3:2).

¹⁵¹ Williams, *The Edge of Words*, ix.

¹⁵² *GT*, 62.