Sexing the Trinity

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Erotic parodies

For George Bataille (1897-1962) the world is 'purely parodic'. Each thing we see is 'the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form' (Bataille 1985: 5). For Bataille, everything in the world is ultimately relatable to everything else, everything can be substituted for another thing, in a ceaseless process of metaphoric exchange. It is the circulation of language that makes this possible; and since it is possible in language it is possible in the world(s) that language constitutes. The coupling of words performs the copulation of bodies.

For Bataille, parody utterly eroticises the world, so that in the running of the 'locomotive's wheels and pistons' he sees the world's 'two primary motions' of 'rotation and sexual movement'. In the image of the steam engine's pounding pistons and turning wheels, he sees the coupling of animals and the movements of the planets, always moving from 'their own position in order to return to it, completing their rotation'. These 'two motions'—the thrusting of sexual frenzy and the circling of the stars—are 'reciprocally transformed, the one into the other', so that the turning of the earth 'makes animals and men have coitus' and—since 'the result is as much the cause as that which provokes it'—the coupling of animals and men turns the earth (Bataille 1985: 6).

In this article I want to trace the similar parodying of the erotic in the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar. While Bataille couples the sun and moon with the sea, with clouds and plants, with the coitus of animals and the 'amorous frenzy' of men and women (Bataille 1985: 5), Balthasar couples the processions of the divine Trinity with the birthing of a maiden's child, with the kiss of a bride and groom who are also mother and son—bone of bone and flesh of flesh, with the embrace of every couple in Christ, and of every soul with God.

By thinking the parallels between the 'motions' of Trinity, Christ and church (Mary) as parodic transformations, I want to unveil the ancient cultural biology that Balthasar both exposes and conceals in his 'suprasexual' erotics. By referring to parodies rather than metaphors, symbols or analogies, I do not so much intend to deny the propriety of these terms, as disturb the ease with which theology uses them.

Analogy sets a 'certain likeness' within a 'greater unlikeness' (Saward 1990: 18). But since such analogy does not measure the distance between the analogues, the 'certain likeness' gains in intensity from the silence of the unmeasured space—the 'greater unlikeness'—in which it is set. The shock of calling analogy 'parody' may remind us that in using analogies—even one as hallowed as the fatherhood of God—we do not escape the historical and the cultural, from which the 'certain likeness' is taken.

The 'dance of dispossession'

By means of the parodic copula Bataille relates sexual rhythm with planetary motion; Balthasar—in a no less surreal manner—relates the economic with the immanent Trinity. It is not the relation as such that constitutes the surreal in

Balthasar, as his supposition that in the economic Trinity—the scriptural story of Christ's ministry, death and resurrection—we see the inner-economy of the immanent Trinity, its fundamental dynamic, a drama that has, as it were, always-already occurred before its expression in the history of the world. Thus the mission of Christ is the historical concretion of the Son's procession from the Father, and Balthasar's 'great insight', as John Saward puts it, is to see that 'the "kenosis" of the Incarnation is made possible by and lays open a preceding and underlying kenosis within the Trinity' (Saward 1990: 28). Thus the incarnation as kenosis—the self-gift of Christ unto death—is the non-identical repetition or parody of the intratrinitarian kenosis, the Father's eternal dispossession and donation of himself to the Son.

It is the nature of God to be endlessly abundant, perpetually effusive, overflowing with fecund love; an unceasing donation of self to an other—'not another God but an other in God' (Balthasar 1990b: 31). The one who is thus given—eternally—is constituted as gift and reception, and thus can only in turn give again, thereby establishing the circulation of the eternal charity. This spinning love, as it were, is the act of the Trinity, spinning so fast, with such joy, that—for no other reason than its sheer goodness—there flows the world, which, caught in the circling draft, is to be drawn back into the eternal rotation.

It is then out of this circling dynamic, this 'dance of dispossession' (Saward 1990: 31), that there flows a series of relationships, each one of which, like the figures or sets of a dance, differently repeats the preceding one, joined only by a parodic copula. This is the flow of the divine mission which repeats, *ad extra* and non-identically, the preceding procession of the Son from the Father.

Continuum and indeterminacy

I now wish to introduce two related objections to the foregoing description of Balthasar's trinitarian reflections. First, Bataille's parodic copula presumes a continuous domain in which to operate. No matter how fanciful or shocking his connections, they take place within the single space of the cosmos; they do not presume a radical discontinuity between any of the terms, such as the infinite distance that theology presumes to separate the creator from the creature, and which requires some concept of analogy for its bridging. Bataille's parodic world is the pre-Christian cosmos that Balthasar describes as the 'all-embracing context' of 'being as a whole, which always includes the *theion*' (Balthasar 1990a: 347). This ancient cosmos—as in Plato's *Republic*—is already one of parodic substitution, in which the rightly ordered soul is the rightly ordered polis is the rightly ordered cosmos, exhibiting what Balthasar terms a 'fluid *analogia entis*'. He notes that such a cosmos—embracing both human and divine being—'survived, in a Christian transposition, right into modern times' (Balthasar 1990a: 348). However, it would seem that one has to assume the survival of such a cosmos *in* Balthasar, if his kenotic repetitions are to be read as a continuum of parodic substitutions. But this is to raise my first question to Balthasar: How far do his analogies have to travel? What is the distance between the terms that his copulas hold together?

The second objection that I wish to raise with regard to my application of Bataille to Balthasar, concerns the reversibility or inversions of Bataille's parodies, since on Bataille's account the pistons drive the wheels and the wheels power the pistons; copulation turns the planet and the planet moves the copulators, and so we

are asked to imagine a perhaps perpetual motion with an indeterminate cause. In an economy of radical substitution, there can be no fixed priority or stable hierarchy. But then this raises my second question to Balthasar. Is it so certain that he can establish the priority presumed in his parodic account of trinitarian kenosis? Might the procession of Son from Father be the parody of creation, or of incarnation, or of redemption, or of the relationship between man and woman, rather than that they are parodies of a prior intratrinitarian kenosis? In short, are matters not more fluid, more 'uncanny', as in the way of ancient cosmology (Balthasar 1990a:352)?

It is these two questions—how analogical is Balthasar's *analogia entis*, and how can he preserve the Trinity from contamination by its human parodies—that I now want to bring to a consideration of Balthasar's body theology.

Male and female he created them (Genesis 1.27)

For Balthasar—following Genesis—Eve is created in order to establish community for Adam, as his helpmate, counter-image and complement (Balthasar 1990a: 365). Indeed one might think that Eve is but a second Adam, since Adam recognises her as bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh (Genesis 2.23), and Balthasar insists that they share 'an identical human nature'. Nevertheless, Balthasar also insists on their near absolute difference. Their identical nature does not, as Balthasar puts it, 'protrude, neutrally, beyond the sexual difference, as if to provide neutral ground for mutual understanding'.

> The male body is male throughout, right down to each cell of which it consists, and the female body is utterly female; and this is also true of their whole empirical experience and ego-consciousness. ... Here there is no *universale ante rem*, as all theories of a nonsexual or bisexual (androgynous) primitive human being would like to think. (Balthasar 1990a: 365-6)

Thus Balthasar thinks man and woman, Adam and Eve, as two poles of a differentiated unity, and that this unity must be thought according to the drama of the incarnation which, as we have seen, is always-already the drama of the Trinity, and which must also be understood as the drama of the church. The unified difference of Christ and church is variously parodied: as head and members of one body, as the nuptial embrace of bridegroom and bride, and of mother and child. Here it is Mary who attains to the pitch of parodic substitution, since she is both the mother of Jesus and, as mother-church, of each member of his body; but as the church she is also the bride of Christ, not only the mother but the wife of her son.

But how successful is Balthasar's attempt to think the difference-in-unity of man and woman? Balthasar finally fails to think sexual difference, not because he stresses unity at the expense of difference, but because the unity he does stress is finally and only male: constituting a difference within the male. Needless to say, this failure is also present in his account of the Trinity.

(Relative) masculine priority

Balthasar's insistence that sexual difference is to be traced 'right down to each cell' of the male and female body, so that one can speak of male and female cells, is a particularly modern notion, dependent—as Thomas Laqueur has shown—on the invention at sometime in the eighteenth century of two human sexes; a model which gradually replaced the more ancient idea—dependent on Aristotle and

Galen— of one sex with two genders (Laqueur 1990: 149-192). More specifically, Balthasar's notion of male and female cells may be traced to the eminent nineteenth-century biologist Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), who argued that males were constituted of *catabolic* cells, that expended energy, whereas females were composed of *anabolic* cells, that conserved energy. On the basis of this evolutionary difference Geddes maintained the typical gender roles of his day, arguing that what 'was decided among the pre-historic Protozoa cannot be annulled by an act of Parliament' (Geddes and Thompson 1889: 266). Whatever the origin of the idea in Balthasar, it would seem—when taken with his opposition to the idea of an androgynous human being—to indicate a firm resistance to a monological account of humankind. Nevertheless, as I hope to show, it is possible to read Balthasar as finally purveying a covert androgyny.

Yes—for Balthasar—human being is dipolar, but one of the poles has priority. In the order of creation they do not arrive simultaneously, but sequentially; and in this they parody the order of incarnation: 'Jesus Christ can only enter the human sphere at the one pole, in order, from that vantage point, to go on to fulfil the other pole'.

> This becomes concrete in the man/woman relationship: because of the natural, relative priority of the man (given an equality of both persons), the Word of God, on account of its absolute priority, can only enter the world of the human in the form of a man, 'assimilating' the woman to itself (Ephesians 5.27) in such a way that she, who comes from him and is at the same time 'brought to him' by God, is equal to him, 'flesh of his flesh'. (Balthasar 1990a: 411)

This text is tense with the indeterminacy of parodic direction, just keeping in check the potential of each parody to turn around and go in the opposite direction to that to which it is here marshalled. Balthasar wants equality of male and female but the text displays the priority of the male; he wants the priority of the male but the text insinuates an equality with the female, so we have the 'relative priority of the man', which only whispers the relative equality of the woman. The Word has absolute priority and so must have the (relative) priority of the man, rather than the posteriority of the woman; but if the Word's priority follows that of the man, whose priority does the man's follow? Who gives priority to the man if not the Word? The priorities would seem to rotate, chasing one another. Why can the Word only enter the world of the human as a man, why can it not adopt the form of a woman, the posterior position? Surely the Word is not constrained by the created order which is but a parody of a preceding heavenly one? Or if it is so constrained—constrained by itself, by it's 'nature'—must we not suppose the Word already masculine?

Imagine reversing the order of creation—of Adam and Eve, man and woman—so that Adam comes from Eve and is brought to her, and the Word can only enter the world of the human in the form of a woman; so that Ephesians 5.21-27 now reads:

> Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Husbands, be subject to your wives, as to Christ. For the wife is the head of the husband as Christ is the head of the church, her body, and is herself its saviour. As the church is subject to Christ, so let husbands also be subject in everything to their wives. Wives, love your husbands, as Christ loved the church and gave herself up for him, that she might sanctify him having cleansed him by the washing of water with the

> word, that she might present the church to herself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that he might be holy and without blemish.

In keeping with the overall reversal, I have changed the gender of the church's pronoun, so that instead of a male Christ with a female body, as in Ephesians, we have a female Christ with a male body. The reversal allows us to imagine a different world, but does it require us to imagine a different theology, different kinds of relationship between the persons of the Trinity (Mother, Daughter and Holy Spirit), different kinds of relationship between the Daughter and her church? If the answer is yes, then I think it is clear that we are thinking the Trinity a parody of creation; change the order of the sexes, the relative priority of one to the other, and we have to change heaven. But if the answer is no—as it surely is—then we can see that creation is properly a parody of the Trinity, a non-identical repetition in the order of created being of the trinitarian relations, which are now seen to be determinative of human bodies, but not of human sexes.

Eve's flesh

Here is another take on the problem: Does Eve have her own flesh? Adam recognises her as bone of his bones, flesh of his flesh (Genesis 2.23). In short, she has the bones and flesh of a man, and Balthasar does not demur from this. His reference to male and female cells is only a gesture, as also his appeal to genetics as providing a supporting parody for the idea that human being is understood more properly as feminine than as masculine, as Marian rather than Christic. For according to the flow of the trinitarian parodies, Marian flesh is already male flesh, since as the bride of the groom—the second Eve—Mary is—as in the passage I have already quoted—flesh of his flesh (Balthasar 1990a: 411).

This is confirmed by another passage in the *Theo-Drama*, in which Balthasar follows Augustine, and couples the coming forth of the church from Christ through the death of the latter on the cross—the second Eve from the second Adam (the mother/bride from the son/husband)—with the coming forth of Eve from the wound in Adam's side, the extracted bone. This confirms the eternal (relative) priority of the masculine.

> The reciprocal fruitfulness of man and woman is surpassed by the ultimate priority of the 'Second Adam', who, in suprasexual fruitfulness, brings a 'companion', the Church, into being. Now the 'deep sleep' of death on the Cross, the 'taking of the rib' in the wound that opens the heart of Jesus, no longer take place in unconsciousness and passivity, as in the case of the First Adam, but in the consciously affirmed love-death of the *Agape*, from which the Eucharist's fruitfulness also springs. The relative priority of the man over the woman here becomes absolute, insofar as the Church is a creation of Christ himself, drawn from his own substance. All the same, the first account of creation is overfulfilled here, for in the mind of God the incarnate Word has never existed without his Church (Ephesians 1.4-6). (Balthasar 1990a: 413)

However, perhaps Christ's flesh is itself womanly, since as I have already mentioned, the Christ of Ephesians is transsexual, a male with a female body. The answer to this supposition is already given in Genesis, where there is really only one kind of flesh—Adam's—from which Eve's flesh derives, thus parodying—or being parodied by—the ancient biology which posited two genders upon one sex, the female being a cooler version of the male. It is this biology that really informs

Balthasar's theology (rather than the more recent, nineteenth-century biology of Patrick Geddes), and it is this ancient biology that Balthasar parodies in the Trinity.

Why 'Father'?

As we have seen, Balthasar understands God's intratrinitarian being according to two reciprocal acts, the giving and receiving of love, the outpouring of divine agape and its return, so constituting the eternal circulation of charitable desire, which is endlessly repeated, non-identically, in the incarnation and creation. Giving and receiving are parodied as masculinity and femininity, informing both human flesh and trinitarian being, so that sexual difference is parodied in heaven. But since there is no sex in God—to suppose which would be to fall into gnostic mythology—heavenly masculinity and femininity are suprasexualities: supramasculinity and suprafemininity.

David L. Schindler notes that 'Balthasar's carefully qualified treatment of the question of gender in God follows the processions in God'.

> That is, the Father, as the begetting origin-without-origin, is primarily supramasculine (*übermännlich*); the Son, as begotten and thus receptive (*der Geschehenlassende*) is suprafeminine (*überweiblich*); but then the Father and the Son, as jointly spirating the Spirit, are again supramasculine; the Spirit then is suprafeminine; finally, the Father, who allows himself to be conditioned in return in his begetting and spirating, himself thereby has a suprafeminine dimension. (Schindler 1993: 206)

Here masculinity is associated with giving, as begetting and spirating, as generating; whereas femininity is associated with receiving; in other words—and according to a certain biology—masculine and feminine parody the active and passive partners in the act of insemination or fertilization. As Schindler notes, the trinitarian processions or relations, which are represented temporally, must be understood simultaneously, so that both supramasculinity and suprafemininity are 'somehow shared' by all the divine 'persons'; in other words—and again according to a certain biology—the Trinity is parodied as a self-inseminating, self-fertilizing womb.

Balthasar, who warns against the error of projecting 'the difference between the sexes upon God', so that one might see the Spirit as feminine, 'the "womb" in which generation occurs', nevertheless allows that for those who wish to 'go further', the feminine is best sought in the Son, who in his earthly existence 'allowed himself to be led and "fertilized" by the Father', while yet at the same time representing the 'originally generative force of God in the world'. And since the Son—the inseminated icon of the inseminator—proceeds from the Father, 'the different sexes are, in the end, present in the latter in a "preternatural" way' (Balthasar 1990b: 78). It is only at the end of this remarkable passage from Balthasar's meditations on the Apostles' Creed—in which he has imagined the incestuous homosexual coupling of Father and Son—that he reminds us that God remains 'more dissimilar than similar to everything created' (Balthasar 1990b: 79).

In more prosaic terms, Schindler notes that:

> It is not the case that the Father and the Spirit each possess one 'gender' to the exclusion of the other, or that the Son alone possesses both 'genders'; it is rather the case that all three persons share both 'genders' (share in some sense both generativity and receptivity), *but always by way of an order that remains asymmetrical.* (Schindler 1993: 207)

Thus, as Schindler brings out, the Son is both supramasculine and suprafeminine. He is suprafeminine in relation to what he receives from the Father, yet supramasculine in what he gives, both to the Father and the Spirit, and to the world in creation and incarnation. And what he gives is his own giving, his suprafemininity, given both to Mary, and in her, to the church. Yet at the same time he is also the icon of the Father's supramasculinity, which he has received by way of his preceding suprafemininity, which suggests to Balthasar and Schindler a certain priority of the suprafeminine in Christ and in creation. Yet, as before, this supposed precedence of the suprafeminine conceals an always prior supramasculinity. This is inevitable when one has, like Balthasar, a hierarchical Trinity in which everything is ultimately traced back to a primal origin who, in himself, always-already, gives and receives, and who is always and only 'Father'.

This is what remains truly remarkable in Balthasar and Schindler, especially Schindler, who, in the essay I have been quoting, does not even raise the question: why 'Father'? Nor does he or Balthasar ask why the Father's primary act is considered supramasculine rather than suprafeminine? Why not think donation suprafeminine and reception supramasculine? In a sense, of course, Balthasar has already done this, in that both Father and Son are alike suprafeminine and supramasculine, that is, conceived androgynously or hermaphroditically. Nevertheless, in Balthasar, they are male hermaphrodites. However, Balthasar does try to explain why the simple origin of all is 'Father'.

> That he is Father we know in utmost fullness from Jesus Christ, who constantly makes loving, thankful, and reverent reference to him as his Origin. It is because he bears fruit out of himself and requires no fructifying that he is called Father, and not in the sexual sense, for he will be the Creator of man and woman, and thus contains the primal qualities of woman in himself in the same simultaneously transcending way as those of man. (Balthasar 1990b: 30)

Needless to say, the Father's bearing of fruit out of himself without need of fructifying, does not explain why he is named 'Father'. On the very same ground one might better name him 'Mother'. Balthasar's *non sequitur* is indicative of his failure to maintain the 'greater unlikeness' between God and humankind. In the passage just quoted we are told that God's fruitfulness, his self-fructifying nature, is not to be understood in a sexual way. Elsewhere, as we have seen, Balthasar refers to the suprasexual. But the addition of 'supra' fails to measure the infinite distance between ourselves and the Trinity, whose relations Balthasar describes in resolutely sexual terms, parodying the ancient biology that informs Balthasar's Trinity. The man gives to the woman, who is but an extension of himself. She takes what she is given and returns it, enhanced, to his greater glory, having become the mother of his child. This is the drama of the Trinity, of its processions and missions.

Cultural biology

Breandán Leahy, in his study of the Marian principle in Balthasar's theology, has a curious footnote, in which he tells us that Balthasar 'guards' against any 'false implication' arising from his identification of God with 'the "masculine" active principle ... while human creaturehood is seen as the organ of feminine receptive, dialogical and maternal fecundity'.

> Von Balthasar writes that, prescinding from any and every social system, be it

> patriarchal or matriarchal, and from all theories of procreation, be they ancient, scholastic or modern, it remains true that in the act of sexual intercourse the man is the initiator, the one who shapes, while the woman's active role is essentially receptive. In this act the woman is awakened to the fullness of her feminine self-awareness. (Leahy 1996: 85 n.187)

It would seem that our culture always takes us unawares. The ancient masculinist biology that Balthasar nowhere questions is both product and producer of an hom(m)osexual culture, in which there are really only men; women being their disavowed vulnerability. Balthasar is unaware that this culture shapes his understanding of sexuality, of masculinity and femininity; and because of his failed *analogia entis*, he is unable to realise the fluidity of sexual symbolics when applied to the bodies of actual men and women.

It may be that only when theology makes the same-sex couple its paradigm of sexual difference, will it be able to think sexual difference not in crudely biologistic terms, as in so much of Balthasar, but in more properly theological ones. This thinking of sexual difference is indeed already begun in Balthasar as the relationship of donation, reception and return; but it needs to be thought more radically, as that which establishes sexual difference, so that whether it plays between Father and Son, man and man, woman and woman, or woman and man, it alone constitutes sexual difference. In this way, what our culture may dictate as our sex and gender will no longer be determinative of our freedom to give and receive love. For truly in Christ there is no male and female, only the reciprocation of bodies; beautiful parodies of the trinitarian donation.

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