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Substantial Poetics

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Kimberly Johnson, *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. 237 pp.

The dust jacket of Kimberly Johnson's *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England* features a detail from Caravaggio's *Incredulity of Saint Thomas*—or rather, from the Ufizzi gallery's copy of that painting. If you don't know the image, you can easily find it online. What do you see? A meditation on the incarnation and resurrection of Christ that prompts a search for spiritual meaning in the event depicted? A shockingly intimate tactile encounter? An exquisite *chiaroscuro* composition that offsets black with earth tones and luminous ivory? While the answer may be "all three," Johnson's goal is to nudge those of us too firmly wedded to the first answer—the one that privileges religious hermeneutics—toward the more sensuous responses. If you are a critic who views seventeenth-century poetry through a theological lens, Johnson has you in her sights.

A learned classicist—at ease with Greek as well as Latin texts—and a poet whose own work has enriched contemporary American *belles lettres* with a remarkable blend of *philologia*, phenomenology, and spirituality, Johnson brings to her project a scholarly and artistic authority that the doctrinally-minded target-reader should not underestimate. The tone of the book too often telegraphs Johnson's somewhat patronizing exasperation with "well-meaning critics" who have—in her view—neglected "*the way poems work* as literary artifacts" (p. 1) in their search for theological content; she downplays the ways

in which such critics *do* attend to structure, prosody, and the play of visual and auditory stimuli in poems.

But perhaps some over-correction is warranted. As Johnson notes, the critical "new formalism" first described as such in *A Happier Eden*, Heather Dubrow's study of the Stuart epithalamion,[1] has not yet prevailed as decisively as one might wish as an alternative to the New Historicism. As Johnson rightly points out, "what Stephen Greenblatt famously called 'cultural poetics' has"—far too often—"supplanted a serious and sustained engagement with actual poetics."[2] There is no denying that many literary critics read *through* form as though it were not there, failing to appreciate the contours of language and the details of structure that distinguish poems from other kinds of discourse. And as Johnson demonstrates, the problem is especially acute when critics are reading poems inspired by a sacramental religion that makes the health of the soul dependent upon the body's eating of God incarnate.

Many seventeenth-century poems of this sort, Johnson argues, do not permit the sublimation of physical images into spiritual meanings; on the contrary, they "simultaneously assert the linguistic sign as an intractable and unsublimable object and the central role of the body as a communicative and a perceptual instrument" (p. 27). Such poems, as Johnson reads them, function very much as does the Caravaggio painting of Saint Thomas's encounter with the risen Christ, in which the burly, red ochre saint pokes his thick and rigid index finger much, much too far into the pale flesh of the resurrected Jesus, probing a wound that is unmistakably vaginal in shape and depth. The poems, like the painting, goad the reader (or viewer) to dwell upon the image as such, to marvel at the effects the artist has achieved in his medium. And at the same time, by insisting on the palpable, flagrant physicality of human flesh, they confound and disturb unexamined piety of the sort that floats too easily into the realm of *intangible* substance. I should clarify: Johnson does not discuss the image that adorns her book's jacket; she leaves it to speak for itself. But Caravaggio's painting—

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[1]Dubrow, *A Happier Eden: The Politics of Marriage in the Stuart Epithalamium* (Cornell University Press, 1990).

[2]Johnson, p. 162, citing Dubrow, p. 269, and Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 4-5.

created circa 1601–1602—was very popular and much copied even during the artist's lifetime; and this fact is relevant: in the wake of Reformation debate over the relationship between the sacrament and its divine referent, facsimiles and originals, simulacra and substances, things and words become harder to distinguish.

Johnson's "slightly immoderate ambition," as she calls it (p. 33), is to demonstrate how this post-Reformation shift changed the nature of poetry. She does "not seek to rehearse the arguments made by Malcolm Ross in his stealthily enduring 1954 study *Poetry and Dogma*," which "takes a dim, not to say curmudgeonly, view of post-Reformation poetry" (p. 2); rather Johnson argues that seventeenth-century devotional poems are enriched by the poets' handling of sacramental signification. Each of the writers she discusses—George Herbert, Edward Taylor, John Donne, and Richard Crashaw—is inspired, Johnson argues, by the "issues of signification" central to debates over the Eucharist (p. 2); and each responds to those debates by encouraging readers to focus on the prosodic form and the sensuous surface of his poems' language. These writers, Johnson argues, practice an "antiabsorptive poetics" that rejects referentiality in favor of a language in which form *is* substance. The term "antiabsorptive" comes from the writings of the prominent contemporary American "language poet" Charles Bernstein; but as Johnson points out, Bernstein's "diction sounds a strong echo to the theological treatises of the sixteenth century," and this—she argues—is because "the stable of unsublimable, self-asserting flourishes of technique that we have come, in our enlightened postmodernity, to think of as *poetics* was effectively developed four hundred years ago by devotional poets" (pp. 23, 33).

Johnson does not cite what one would initially suppose to be a useful point of departure for her argument: John Freccero's landmark 1975 article "The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch's Poetics,"[3] which argues that Petrarch invented modern secular poetry by deliberately short-circuiting Augustinian semiotics, creating poems that ultimately refer to nothing but themselves. But Johnson's argument is in some ways more radical than Freccero's. His approach to Petrarch's poetics heavily emphasizes semiotics: he argues that the *Rime sparse* are signs

[3] *Diacritics* 5.1: 34–40.

that really signify themselves (rather than any of the things they seem to be "about" (such as Laura or love). But the poems of Herbert, Taylor, Donne, and Crashaw, as Johnson reads them, are not so much signifiers as objects of perception in their own right, richly sensuous linguistic bodies through the veins of which pulses a sacred and living blood, visible grace notes, surfaces to be touched with the fingertips of the mind, morsels that taste good on the tongue. To treat them *exclusively* as such would ultimately be too limiting. But critics willing to be schooled in Johnson's reading practices will learn a thing or two about how to oscillate more flexibly between the search for meaning and a more purely somatic response to poetry.

In her Introduction, "Eucharistic Poetics: The Word Made Flesh," Johnson—quoting a key phrase from the *Summa Lyrica* of the influential American poet and critic Allen Grossman—defines the "the presence of presence" as the "fundamental concern" of all lyric poetry.[4] As Johnson points out in an endnote, "The title of Grossman's work indicates his preoccupation with the overlap between theological and poetic questions of presence" (p. 171, n. 51), and the *Summa Lyrica* defines "poetic language" as that which, "by contrast to other kinds of language, has no other function than the eidetic function."[5] Reading a bit further in Grossman's text proves helpful in understanding Johnson's approach: "The strangeness in poetic language arises from the presence of *the eidos*, the presence of presence," Grossman says; he goes on to clarify that he is using the "Greek word *eidos* . . . in its Homeric sense as the form or beauty of the person," as a word that means something similar to the "Latin *species* and German *Bildung*. . . . [T]he sustaining and ideal image of man is the countenance or shape of the person, the basis of human recognition. . . . The person in the poem is known because he has given his *word*. He has staked his existence on the efficacy of this one promise of fidelity. Take him at his word. There is no other way."[6]

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[4]Grossman, *Summa Lyrica* 6.2 in *The Sighted Singer: Two Works on Poetry for Readers and Writers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 232; qtd. in Johnson, p. 25.

[5]Grossman, *Summa Lyrica* 6.2, p. 231.

[6]Grossman, *Summa Lyrica* 6.2–6.3 in *Sighted Singer*, pp. 232–33.

Johnson is committed to helping us take the *eidoi* we encounter in seventeenth-century devotional poems *at their word*. In making this commitment, she protests rather too strenuously readers' tendency to find in religious poems not only the "presence of presence"—which she sometimes, but not always, conflates with the presence of Christ—but the presence of doctrine and spiritual teaching that help them to apprehend that presence. For while it is true that the seventeenth-century poets Johnson analyzes move away from the emphasis of sixteenth-century poetry handbooks on "decorum and pellucidity in poetry," adopting instead an "aesthetic . . . that was increasingly characterized by hermeneutic interruption" (p. 149), they were all men who at some point became clergymen, and all remained seriously invested in poetry's potential to edify and instruct.

Herbert's *The Temple*, for example, begins with a six line prayer entitled "The Dedication," which presents the poet's work to God as his "first fruits" and ends with a prayer for those who may become his readers: "Turn their eyes hither, who shall make a gain: / Theirs, who shall hurt themselves or me, refrain."[7] Herbert emphasizes that his poems are meant for the "eyes" of readers; and his concluding the poem with a pun on "refrain" (meaning both "restrain, hold back, or check" [*OED*, "refrain," v. def. 1a] and "a repeated line or number of lines in a poem . . . typically at the end of each verse" [n.1, def. 2]) elegantly confirms what Johnson calls "Herbert's investment in an interpretive schema that mandates our awareness in the objecthood of signs" (p. 60). But "The Dedication" also pleads for God's intervention in the reception of such poems, anticipating that only *some* readers will "make a gain" by fixing their eyes upon poems like "The Altar."

In the introductory note to his *Summa Lyrica*, Grossman defines the *Summa* itself as a "primer or handbook of commonplaces . . . designed to befriend the reader of poetry (always supposing that the reader of poetry needs a hermeneutic friend) by constructing a culture in which poetry is intelligible." He concludes the note by saying that "Above all, . . . this is a text for use, intended like a poem to give rise to

[7]*The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 45.

thoughts about something else."[8] The "use" of a poem as Grossman defines it, then, is most certainly to assert its own "unassimilable objecthood" in order to "substantiate" itself (Johnson, p. 149); but a poem is also—paradoxically, perhaps—meant to direct the reader's mind toward a referent, a "something else" beyond it. Thus, though Johnson seeks to define the post-Reformation poetics of Herbert, Taylor, Donne, and Crashaw as "antiabsorptive" and resistant to hermeneutic probing, she must, perforce, discuss at some length the theological controversies the content of their poems evokes. For all readers—even those most responsive to form—respond to content; and readers of seventeenth-century devotional verse neither can nor should avoid hermeneutic activity that explores the link between a poem and the theology it evokes, between the poem's immediacy and the "thoughts about something else" to which *both* its form and its content give rise.

Each of Johnson's chapters offers a rich set of close readings, tasting notes that model how one may savor both the poets' sacred vintage and the well-wrought urns in which they offer it to readers. Theologically-inclined scholars may take issue with some of these readings, but what more fruitful result can a critical study have than to prompt the reader to return to the works it discusses, to experience them again with new eyes, new ears, perhaps even new taste buds? It is my grappling with Johnson's argument that has prompted me, for example, to return to *The Temple* and to think carefully about Herbert's "The Dedication," a poem not discussed in *Made Flesh*.

The thesis of Johnson's first chapter—that Herbert's poetry emulates Eucharistic participation both by exploring "the ways in which Christ as Logos is invested with texuality" and by "mak[ing] deliberate use of the materializing valences of text to *present* Christ" (p. 54)—is compelling and well supported. There is some problematic slippage, however, between this thesis and Johnson's apparent insistence, at some points in the chapter, that the poems break entirely free of their semantic content: "Poetic form, in 'The Altar,' *means*—which is to say, *presence as such* means" (p. 46). I wonder whether an assertion of this kind pushes her argument beyond what Herbert's formal ingenuity invites. Later in the chapter, she argues

[8] *The Sighted Singer*, pp. 207, 208.

that in the final two lines of "The Quidditie," "Poetry . . . manages a sense of presence, of *with*-ness, that the Eucharist cannot communicate" (p. 61). Yes, the poem says that "a verse" is "that which while I use / I am with thee, and *Most take all*."[9] But the final line's italicized "worldly proverb" (as C. A. Patrides glosses it)[10] does not, I think, declare poetry more effectual than sacrament; rather, when one reads it in its original context, one sees that the competition in the poem is between devotional poetry and various courtly and mercantile activities, commodities, and achievements.

I find troubling as well that, both in the Introduction and in Chapter 1, Johnson elides the distinction between theological dispute and liturgical worship. While the problem with most criticism of seventeenth-century devotional poetry, she asserts, is that critics are distracted by an attempt to pin down the denominational allegiances of the poets, her own readings are offered in support of the thesis that English devotional poets in the post-Reformation period develop "particular poetic strategies that directly respond to the hermeneutic challenges of sacramental worship and replicate its conflicts" (p. 27). Did these poets, or their readers, face "hermeneutic challenges" in the act "of sacramental worship"? Or is it more accurate to say, as Johnson does on the previous page, that their poems are "animate[d]," by their engagement with "the eucharistic *debates* of the early modern period" which, for Johnson, "disclose the ontological disjunction between sacramental signs and their divine referents" (p. 26; italics mine)?

R. V. Young argues that, regardless of the poet's denomination, post-Reformation devotional poetry tends to privilege "the articulation of the soul's experience of God" over "theological formulation" and that "English devotional poets of the seventeenth century, . . . though mostly Protestants, are not, *in their poetry*, so much militant proponents of . . . Reformation doctrine . . . as Christians confronting God and seeking to articulate the experience of grace (or its absence) in their lives."[11] On one level, Johnson agrees: "[I]f theological argument is the goal," she says, "poetry offers a circumlocuting and inefficient means

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[9]*English Poems*, ed. Wilcox, p. 254.

[10]*The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Dent, 1974), p. 87.

[11]*Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-century Poetry* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 16, 32; italics Young's.

to such an end" (p. 27). But while for Young, devotional poets are Christians first and foremost, for Johnson, they are *poets* first and foremost; and their confrontations with God take place, if they take place, somewhere else than "*in their poetry*." There, they confront readers; and they do so through sound, image, structure, and prosody.

The second chapter of *Made Flesh*, "Edward Taylor's 'Menstruous Cloth': Structure as Seal in the *Preparatory Meditations*," explores how Taylor's poems convey an abject feminine posture, enacting a poetic *kenosis* or menstrual purging through structure and form as well as imagery. The poems Johnson examines are verse meditations that Taylor wrote to prepare, as both minister and communicant, for celebrations of the Lord's Supper in his New England Puritan congregation. Exploring the dynamics of the Calvinist imperative to seek the marks of election in one's soul, Johnson stresses that both "Taylor's homiletic writings" and his *Preparatory Mediations*—written "with obsessive consistency over nearly fifty years"—combine "anxiety about the perceptual elusiveness of the divine" with profound uncertainty regarding the "condition of his own soul." Lacking "the assurance of sense-data" to confirm either the presence of God or his own election, Johnson concludes, "Taylor turns to poetic form in an effort to materialize that which cannot be perceived. . . . [T]he poetic text [thus] comes to embody in a demonstrable and consistent form Taylor's own process of spiritual regeneration, and enacts structurally Taylor's effort to purge sin and prove ready for Christ's grace" (p. 65). The chapter shows how the trope of the "wedden garment"—inspired by Jesus' parable of the wedding feast in Matthew 22—animates both Taylor's prose *Treatise Concerning the Lord's Supper* and his poetry.

Johnson acknowledges that the "process of resignation" involved in Taylor's poetry points up the tensions inherent in the kind of Calvinism he espoused: "True regeneration—the weave of Taylor's wedden garment—involves, perhaps paradoxically, an active demonstration of feminine submission to the Bridegroom" (p. 72). The "weave" referred to here is the "cyclical structure of the *Preparatory Meditations*," which "provides Taylor with the stable, perceptible form he needs to perform the principles of constancy, self-denial and receptivity that characterize bridelike preparation for Christ" (p. 80). Countering scholars who have found "the unvarying form of the *Meditations*" to be "tedious," without "progress in . . .

thought or artistry," "repetitious and unending," Johnson argues that the "dramatic stasis" these readers find so problematic is in fact an artful strategy that "contributes rather actively to Taylor's project"; his "lyrics, so regular in their production every four to six weeks, enact a periodic self-cleansing in preparation for the wedden feast, realizing a process of menstrual evacuation" (p. 80). The form is not, Johnson insists, merely ancillary:

> It's not sufficient to say that poetic structure here serves to reinforce the content of the poems; rather, the structural organization of the series—the regular intervals of its composition, the remarkable stanzaic consistency over nearly five fertile decades—makes its own set of claims that both complements and contradicts the thematic drama of the poems. Indeed, the success of the structural argument of the *Preparatory Meditations* depends upon the failure of their thematic argument, for it is Taylor's continued apprehension about his own base unworthiness that prompts the next poem, and the next, and the next.
>
> (pp. 84–85)

This perceptive reading of an under-read American disciple of Herbert will prompt many a reader to seek out more of Taylor's poetry than the oft-anthologized allegorical lyrics "Upon a Spider Catching a Fly," "Huswifery," and "Upon Wedlock, and Death of Children"—all of which are "Miscellaneous Poems" not included in the *Preparatory Meditations*.

I have only occasionally taught selections from the *Preparatory Meditations* in my courses, but Johnson's insights have primed me to do so again soon, and with a greater appreciation for Taylor's poetics. Still, who would assign the entire 217 *Preparatory Meditations* even if there were sufficient space in one's syllabus to do so? The somewhat numbing effect that the collection in its entirety has produced in so many scholarly readers remains significant, notwithstanding Johnson's excellent points about the way Taylor's static prosody works to advance his own spiritual agenda. As John T. Shawcross notes, "[W]hat the reader elicits from a literary work is a major factor in

determining what the author does or does not do."[12] Johnson herself takes some readerly liberties in determining "what the author does" in Taylor's case; that is, though Louis Martz, in his Foreword to the Yale edition, notes that the *Preparatory Meditations* were "composed at intervals of about two months, and sometimes longer, for Communion Sundays,"[13] Johnson compresses the interval to the more nearly mensual (and thus menstrual) "every four to six weeks" (p. 80). A survey of the dates attached to the poems confirms that Martz's account of Taylor's compositional schedule is more accurate than Johnson's. This does not, I would stress, invalidate Johnson's response to Taylor's unflagging regularity. As Shawcross says, "The text is an experience that the reader undergoes; it is an experience whose lineaments, however, have been laid out by the author" (p. 1). Clearly, it was Taylor who structured his *Preparatory Meditations* as acts of "periodic self-cleansing in preparation for the wedden feast" and who suggested through his imagery that that cleansing was "a process of menstrual evacuation" (p. 80).

My only complaint, then, is that Johnson's approach to poetics tends to invest poems with powers akin to the irresistible grace of Calvin's God; she tends to discount what John Shawcross calls "the reader's text" in favor of what he calls "the author's text" and "the text." Indeed, Johnson asserts that some poems—those by John Donne in particular—leave the reader no freedom whatsoever. Discussing Donne's "The Flea," in one of her few brief forays into non-devotional poetry, Johnson argues that the poem is "gleefully ostentatious in assembling metaphors so tenuous, so extreme in their yoking of heterogeneous terms, that they *can only be resisted*" (p. 116; italics mine); that is, the reader *has no choice* but to resist them. Similarly, she says, Donne as devotional poet "does not *let us* see through to the referential field 'behind' his figures" (p. 121, italics mine). The poetics of "literary receptionism," in which the aesthetic, spiritual, and rhetorical success of a poem in part depend upon readers' cooperation is—as Johnson sees it—"weakened by the

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[12]*Intentionality and the New Traditionalism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1991), p. 1.

[13]*The Poems of Edward Taylor*, ed. Donald E. Stanford (New Haven: Yale UP, 1960), p. xxi.

prospect of uncooperative readers" (p. 109). Her own critical methods, it seems to me, are evidence to the contrary; for she is an extremely feisty reader whose analysis of what Shawcross terms "the text" (the inscribed or imprinted letters themselves, the poetic artifact) often daringly risks imposing post-modernity's delight in self-referential signs upon early modern Christianity's deep distrust of idolatrous signification.

Indeed, while Johnson's readings of Donne in Chapter 3 are often highly perceptive and incisive, they are also—at times—articulated in terms that stretch the boundaries of Christian poetics to the breaking point. Analyzing *Death's Duell*, Donne's notoriously gruesome final sermon, in which images of bodily dissolution and vermiculation prevail, and three of his most shocking Holy Sonnets ("What if this present," "Show me deare Christ," and "Batter my heart"), Johnson points out quite accurately that "Donne's practice . . . is to seize upon a perfectly conventional figure and to elaborate that trope until it reveals the strangeness it contains" (p. 96). But when she proceeds to argue that "In the process of that elaboration into strangeness, Donne's tropes cease to function referentially, the figurative term's substance interposing itself into any symbolic transparency," I demur. Whether the vehicle of a Donne metaphor does or does not establish itself as an opaque curtain depends, I think, upon who is hearing or reading the metaphor; and it seems inaccurate to me to suggest that Donne—rhetorically extravagant though he is—*designs* his tropes to interpose themselves between divine grace and the listener or reader. I am similarly skeptical when, in Chapter 2, Johnson says that "Taylor exploits the structure of his *Preparatory Meditations* as a communicative end in itself—that is, as an object whose signification is self-contained" (p. 87). As Johnson notes in her Introduction, "Calvin argues for a material encounter with [sacramental] signs themselves because the reality they signify inheres in them" (p. 19), but the poetics Johnson is describing would deliberately, even programmatically, encourage readers to receive sacred signs as valuable in themselves, without regard to their transcendent signifiers. Can Christian poetry be both "devotional" and deliberately, unrepentantly grounded in such a semiotic?

Johnson's answer is clearly "yes," though she seeks to redefine short-circuited linguistic signs as poetically efficacious rather than

idolatrous, especially as they operate in the extravagant metaphors of John Donne. Chapter 3 builds upon, but also takes issue with, a range of Donne scholars including William Kerrigan, M. Thomas Hester, Robert Whalen, Ramie Targoff, James Baumlin, and others; but Johnson is at her luminous best in her readings of Donne's prose. Particularly fruitful are her comments on a christening sermon and on Expostulation 19 from *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. In the sermon, Johnson explains, "The name [of Jesus] is inextricable from the material being of Jesus: just as *Jehovah* is identical with being, so *Jesus* is identical with enfleshed being" (p. 110). Even better is her commentary on the poetics of the Expostulation (from which she took the title for her sumptuous 2008 collection of poems *a metaphorical god*)[14]: "God's language incorporates the material, the objective: it is fleshed out with 'sinews' and substance; it has, wonderfully, '*things* in thy *words*.' . . . Donne locates the objective substantiality of God's words, its very *thinginess*, in metaphor" (p. 117).

Also very effective is Johnson's fourth chapter, "Richard Crashaw's Indigestible Poetics." Though Richard Rambuss's gorgeous new edition of *The English Poems of Richard Crashaw* came out too late to be available to Johnson as she wrote *Made Flesh*,[15] her chapter on Crashaw will, I think, prompt everyone interested in seventeenth-century devotional poetry to get a copy of Rambuss's edition and re-read Crashaw's sacred epigrams and hymns. Johnson's chapter both confirms and poses challenges to Rambuss's critical commentary on Crashaw, arguing that, while his "critical identification of Crashaw's 'Incarnational Christianity' goes a long way toward contextualizing the poet's corporealist poetics, Rambuss mistakes Crashaw's anxious fixation on the body for enthusiasm" (p. 129). In Crashaw's disturbingly graphic sacred epigrams, in his free translation of Aquinas's "Adoro Te Devote," and in his hymn "To the Name above Every Name, the Name of Iesus," Johnson argues, "corporality must constitute our experience of the divine, however incomplete" (p. 121); and the poet's "participation in the corporeal expressivities of

[14]*A Metaphorical God: Poems* (New York: Persea, 2008).

[15]*The English Poems of Richard Crashaw* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). For a review of this edition, see R. V. Young's "English Crashaw?" on pp. 221–26 below.

incarnational Christianity is not enthusiastic, but fretful, undertaken with an ambivalence that communicates, as Empson rightly recognizes, both adoration and horror."[16]

Yet once more, I find that Johnson gives reader response too little attention. For her, as for Empson, "Crashaw's imagery . . . foregrounds the unhappy effects of a symbolic system that does not yield to an ameliorating spiritual reading" (p. 139); but Rambuss contends that one can acknowledge "the startling weirdness" of Crashaw's poetry without seeing, in his "decorum-flaunting juxtapositions of the otherworldly and the worldly," what Johnson calls "anxious fixation" on the body. For Rambuss, Crashaw's poetry "induces in" the reader, not adoration and horror, but a "whirling mélange of keening affects and vertiginously shifting perspectives."[17] Johnson reads the conclusion of "The Hymn of Saint Thomas in Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament," in which the speaker "demands a more direct and unmediated form of contact with the holy body," as conveying "the profound discomfort that the devotional body presents for the poet" and as dramatizing, "finally, the soul's desire to partake of Christ's sacramental offering *without the impediments* of the flesh and *its perceptual faculties*" (pp. 137, 139; my emphasis). But while R. V. Young, like Johnson, sees in the conclusion of Crashaw's poem an intense "longing for the final revelation of Christ," Young speaks of that revelation as one in which "He will be accessible to *full human perception*,"[18] the perception of the soul, the mind, and the glorified body. For Young, then, Crashaw's expansion of Thomas's thirst trope only "increases the affectivity" of the Latin. My point here is that it makes a difference whether one reads Crashaw as "among the queerest of devotional authors" (Rambuss, p. xxii), as a liturgically-inspired hymnist engaged in an ecstatic and effectual "invocation of presence" (Young, p. 163), or as maker of sacred verse, wrung with anguish over the stubbornly distracting demands of the human body, who expresses

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[16]P. 138; Johnson here paraphrases William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1947), p. 221.

[17] Rambuss, "Richard Crashaw: A Reintroduction," in *The English Poems of Richard Crashaw*, ed. Rambuss, p. xxi.

[18] Young, *Doctrine and Devotion*, p.149; my emphasis.

that anguish through the "effrontery of his poetry's obdurate physicality" (Johnson, p. 139).

Differences in readers' perceptions lead to different assessments of the poetics at work in a text. To cite one more example: Johnson sees a ciborium in the engraving published with Crashaw's "Hymn . . . in Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament":

> The text beneath the ciborium's figure reads "*Ecce panis Angelorum*," or "Behold the bread of Angels." The image, however, does not represent bread but rather the *container* of bread, the receptacle into which the sanctified (that is, transubstantiated) host is placed after the celebration of the Mass. "*Ecce*," the emblem exhorts us: *behold* the miraculous bread of life, the nourishing body of Christ. But the exhortation is delivered even as it points up the impossibility of such a task, given the mediating materiality of the ciborium. . . . The ciborium emblem . . . points toward the sensorily apprehensible presence of the divine even as it declares the sensory inaccessibility of that presence, interjecting veils of mediation between the perceiver and the holy object of desired perception.
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> (pp. 135, 137)

Where Johnson sees a ciborium, however, I see a monstrance or ostensarium, a vessel specifically designed—as the Latin roots of these words indicate—to *show* the worshipper the consecrated host during the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, which the *Catholic Encyclopedia* defines as "a manner of honouring the Holy Eucharist, by exposing It, with proper solemnity, to the view of the faithful in order that they may pay their devotions before It."[19] A form of worship associated with the annual feast of *Corpus Christi*, the Exposition is also central to the "Quarant'Ore" or "Forty Hours' Devotion," which was formally established in 1592 by Pope Clement VIII as a practice to be promoted in all the churches of Rome. It involves the use of vessels in which the host is clearly visible inside a disk- or cylinder-shaped enclosure of crystal or glass. The phrase featured in Crashaw's

[19]Herbert Thurston, "Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 5 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909). Online at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05713a.htm>.

emblem—"Ecce panis Angelorum"—is quoted from another of the Eucharistic hymns of Aquinas translated by Crashaw, "Lauda Sion," which St. Thomas is thought to have composed around 1264 specifically for the Mass of *Corpus Christi*.[20] It is included in the 1570 *Missale Romanum* liturgy for that Mass. Thus, the image in the engraving that accompanies Crashaw's "Hymn of Saint Thomas in Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament" *could* depict a cylindrically-shaped ciborium with the image of an enthroned host carved into its opaque surface; but the hatching in the image seems to me to suggest a transparent surface through which the viewer can see the cross-stamped circular form of the consecrated host. I thus read the emblem—paired as it is with words quoted from "Lauda Sion"—as reinforcing rather than disrupting the visual imperative "*Ecce panis Angelorum*." Similarly, I see in the language of Crashaw's "Hymn" a recognition of Christ's body not as "occluded by the intervening veils of signification" (p. 135), but as perceptible: both through devout adoration of the transubstantiated host and through the "loud[ly]" audible affirmation of "witness" that the poem proclaims itself to be. "Sweet," Crashaw's speaker says, addressing Christ, "I" though unable, in the Sacrament, to "Taste thee God, or touch thee man," yet "Both . . . believe; and *witness* thee / My Lord too and my God, as *loud* as he": meaning, perhaps, not only as loud as the doubting St. Thomas the Apostle, but as loud as the lyric-writing theologian St. Thomas Aquinas ("The Hymn . . . in Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament," 27, 30–32; my emphasis). For a reader of my devotional and critical persuasion, the Eucharistic poetics here arises from the multivalency of the transitive verb "witness," meaning both "To bear witness to . . . to testify to, attest; to furnish oral or written evidence of" (v. def. 1a) and "To be a witness, spectator, or auditor of . . . to experience by personal (esp. ocular) observation; to be present as an observer at; to see with one's own eyes" (v. def. 4a). My point is not that I am right and Johnson wrong, but that there is more than one valid way to receive "the corporeally substantial matter of Crashaw's symbols" (p. 143).

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[20]Hugh Henry, "Lauda Sion," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 9 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910). Online at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09036b.htm>.

The final chapter of *Made Flesh*—"Immanent Textualities in a Postsacramental World"—is excellent; in it, Johnson turns from devotional lyric to secular poetry, exploring Robert Herrick's "disorienting investment in surfaces" (p. 149), the "principle of the name as a self-substantiating sign" in Ben Jonson's epigrams (p. 155), and Shakespeare's "most lyric-obsessed play," *Love's Labour's Lost*, in which "the seductive substantiality of signs is the very matter that drives the comedy" (p. 157). The chapter demonstrates that Modernist poetics of the sort proclaimed in Archibald MacLeish's "Ars Poetica" ("A poem should not mean / But be") has indeed evolved from early modern poetics. The admirable effect of the book as a whole, then, is to prompt critics' return to the *texts* of seventeenth century religious poems, to urge us to probe the substance that inheres in their form.

I recommend buying your own copy of the book, for the one you check out from the library will be without the dust jacket and its viscerally evocative image of St. Thomas's finger entering the Body of Christ.

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