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Rereading Desire

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Ryan Netzley, *Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist in Early Modern Religious Poetry*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. viii + 287 pp.

Derived from Hegel and Lacan, and dominant in modern criticism, the concept of desire as constituted by the lack of the object of desire fails to account for the forms of desire we encounter in sacramental poetry. After all, a sacrament that promises real presence would appear to preclude the lack upon which desire is supposed to depend. This deceptively simple observation prompts Ryan Netzley to pose a difficult question: "How does one desire a God that one does not lack?" (p. 3). Answering that question requires nothing less than an overhaul of our understanding of devotional desire, a project with potentially wide-ranging implications for the study of early modern literature and culture, and the aim of this ambitious and challenging book.

For Netzley, where Hegel and Lacan get the early moderns wrong, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari get them right, supplanting the negative, dialectical model of desire with a positive and self-sufficient one that construes desire as its own end. This model, as well as the Deleuzian distinction between "work" and "free action," crucially informs this study, which, despite the breadth of its title, focuses specifically on invocations of the eucharist in four seventeenth-century English poets: Herbert, Crashaw, Donne, and Milton. Critically building upon the work of Gary Kuchar, Regina Schwartz, Robert Whalen, and others on sacramental rhetoric and poetics, Netzley locates in such invocations not just the apotheosis of devotional desire but, what's more, a junction of

devotion and reading and a rich opportunity to explore the important relationship between the two. The problem posed by the eucharist for these four poets, as for theologians "from Aquinas to Andrewes," is not so much a problem of signification as a problem of reception, "how to receive presence in a manner that is active but not presumptuous, dismissive, or mercenary" (p. 15). Ultimately, in different ways, Netzley sees each of these four poets pointing to a form of devotion and a kind of reading that mutually strive against teleology to sustain a free and loving desire for the immanent sign in itself.

George Herbert, the subject of the first chapter, expresses the difference between devotional and mercenary desire as that between tasting and eating. Such poems as "Love (III)" and "Divinitie" establish tasting as "a central figure for a non-acquisitive, reverential faith" (p. 38) and eating as an attendant figure for the almost irresistible temptation to approach taste, desire, and everything else as a means to an end. Herbert's poetic depictions of the eucharist in "The H. Communion" and elsewhere teach us instead to attend to the sacramental experience in itself and thus, in Herbert's words, to "have more," that is, to have what we already possess more intensely, "to desire and intensify the desire for the divine presence that is already there" (p. 36). Devotional desire is, contrary to the arguments of those critics, from Stanley Fish to Richard Strier, who predicate desire upon lack, a response to possession and, as such, "entails a rigorous attention to . . . present sacramental phenomena" (p. 53). In the domain of reading, as Netzley demonstrates with regard to such poems as "Jordan (II)" and "The Water-course," and to Herbert's avowed plainness, this means sacrificing the ends of reading, the "interpretive payload" (p. 64), to the act of reading itself and "treating the verse itself as worthy of love" (p. 55). Properly conceived, the free action of reading, like that of devotional desire, takes without dialectically exhausting itself or subtracting from the taken.

Whereas Herbert combats mercenary desire through the emphasis of the "middle relation" between subject and object (p. 33), Richard Crashaw, himself a devotee of Herbert (a point that deserves more attention), renders subject and object indistinguishable. He does so, as we learn in the second chapter, by eschewing metaphor, which endorses with its tenor and vehicle the dualisms of subject-object, immanent-transcendent, signifier-signified, etc., for a radicalized metonymy, which levels these categories in a chain of association and endorses instead "an

immanent indistinguishability between means and ends, worldly and heavenly domains and, in turn, between literal and figurative meanings, signifiers and signifieds" (p. 74). The critical tendency to charge Crashaw with poetic excess, and to read that excess as an expression of the poverty of language in the face of the divine—in other words, as the expression of a lack—surrenders the poet to the very logic of transcendence he opposes. What looks from the dialectical perspective like excess, Netzley sees as an "abundance" expressive of "a notion of experience in which there are only accidents, never substances or meaning behind these accidents" (p. 87) and a "sacramental worldview" in which idolatry is impossible because "God is really and immediately in signs" (p. 98). Such a worldview yields an "aimless" reading practice that does not require us to look beyond words for meaning or beyond reading for purpose but simply to be present and attentive as "a passive receptacle for God's already measured grace" (p. 105).

The third chapter turns to John Donne and presents the sustained anxiety of the Divine Poems not as a reactive, defensive response to an irremediable lack but rather as a free response to an immanently present divinity. Divorced, like Deleuzian desire, from any purpose or significance beyond itself, anxiety is redeemed as "affirmative anxiety," which "does not seek to be assuaged" (p. 107). In this light, "Oh to no end" in "Batter my hart" appears not as "a lament of inadequacy or failure . . . but an expression of joy: it asks us to imagine an escape from the aims—the purpose-driven life and its narcissistic infatuation with its own labour—that cripple the speaker's devotion and conversion" (p. 136). Meanwhile, Donne fosters "anxious reading" by drawing the reader away from the parallel assurance of meaning toward "a-signifying syntactical and grammatical elements" (pp. 114–115). In the same poem, tension between the conjunctions *yet* and *but* shows the poet resisting the dialectical resolution insisted upon by modern criticism and attempting instead to conceive of conversion a-dialectically. For devotee and reader alike, attention to relation itself reconciles sustained devotional anxiety and love.

The fourth and final chapter begins by reading Milton's treatment of the sacrament in the *Christian Doctrine* and *Paradise Lost* as an inherently desirable but soteriologically unnecessary seal or sign of an already immanent divinity. Milton's employment of prolepsis in the early poems on the Nativity, Circumcision, and Passion similarly resists teleology and

directs the reader toward a free, sustained desire for the immanent (the model remains Deleuzian) by folding the future and ends of Christian history into the monistic fullness of the present moment. Much like Donne's "Oh to no end," the "unexpressive notes" of the Nativity Ode suggest not a lack, a failed attempt to express the ineffable, but rather "a positive description of notes that do not try to point beyond themselves to some future apocalypse or transcendent horizon" (p. 174). Milton's characteristic "wariness of ends and effects" (p. 183) becomes even more pronounced in *Paradise Regained*, which "challenges the validity of all drives toward purposiveness" (p. 181) and presents reading, in the Son's rejection of classical learning, for instance, as a purposeless activity. Yet, as with the sacrament, the effect of that purposelessness is to alter the disposition of the reader away from mercenary desire toward love. Reading *is* love—that is, active, attentive desire of the available sign in itself—and love is necessarily unnecessary and not enforced. (The echo of book 3 of *Paradise Lost* is powerfully persuasive, yet one can't help wondering how this picture might be profitably complicated with attention to Milton's own theorization of reading in the *Areopagitica*.)

The critical sophistication of Netzley's argument, which these summaries barely express, may account in part for the difficulty of the book. Perhaps because no direct route can lead us beyond the dialectical face of things to the purpose of purposelessness, about and about we go. Intimations grade into assertions, assertions into arguments. Deep readings gain purchase on the narrow ledge of an editorial discrepancy, a questionable comma, a slant rhyme, or the potentially indeterminate meaning of a single word or phrase. The bold challenge Netzley poses to the basic assumptions about reading and desire that have guided the critical discussion surrounding these poets issues perforce in rigorous and, at times, strained argumentation. If, as he maintains, reading and devotion are not meant to be a struggle, arriving at that understanding may nevertheless feel like one to some readers, as it must have, appropriately enough, to the early modern devotees and readers he evokes.

Those willing to undertake the struggle, however, and freely and lovingly to pursue the kind of sustained attention and anxiety that Netzley sees these poets advocating, win the prospect of a new horizon of possibility. Beyond complicating practical accounts of reading, like that of Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, as well as our sense of the

relationship between the eucharist and early modern semiotics, Netzley's account of sacramental reading strikes directly at the rhetorical, Aristotelian basis of early modern poetics and helps us to imagine the implications, for writers as well as readers, of a poetics that conceives of reading as autotelic. These and the further "conceptual consequences" (p. 192), ranging from the religious to the pedagogical, that Netzley thoughtfully enumerates in the conclusion underscore the fresh and exciting appeal of his argument and, moreover, demonstrate an admirable and all too rare commitment to the broadest possible benefit of scholarship. The book invites the consideration of all students of early modern poetry and poetics and demands the attention of those interested in seventeenth-century English religious poetry and the intersection of early modern literature and poststructuralist theory.

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