

Foreword

THE BEST TEXTS, AND WE COULD BEGIN WITH THE GOSPELS THEMSELVES, are perfectly simple and infinitely complex, or, to put it another way, they have a crystal clarity which has the capacity to reflect the profoundest depths. Jamey Heit's *Liturgical Liaisons* has precisely that clarity and capacity. It is essentially an extended conversation between literature and theology, or perhaps of theology in literature, the literature endlessly and restlessly disturbing and destabilizing, the theology, in Heit's words, "an exercise in stability which . . . is not the text's province." The reader who seriously engages with this book is drawn into a world in which one is left teetering on precipices, confronting betrayal, on the edge of death in moments of seductive eroticism, tragic irony and blinding insight. In short, one enters into and experiences those moments of real presences in a Christian "liturgical poetics" in which light is shone in brilliant flashes on Jesus' eschatological presence, known first in the demonstrations, the words and actions of the Last Supper as they draw attention to the body which is insistently present in all its particularity, on the brink of death, and present also in a universal future that is yet to be realized: *hoc est enim corpus meum*—"for this is my body."

Heit begins his text, which is a kind of act of remembrance, by remarking that "what follows is neither a strict literary analysis nor an exercise in theology." Don't be too quick to take him too seriously—for he is far too serious a writer for such simple literalism. He is, of course, seriously engaged in both of these things—literary analysis and theology—though in his own way. Heit's writings are, very precisely, an enactment of liturgical moments (and nothing can be more theological than that) through brilliant conversations and exchanges with the love poetry of John Donne, priest, and his reclusive nineteenth century American poetic heir and disciple, Emily Dickinson. Theology, like literature, at its best is never rude, but neither is it shy or coy. If we begin on the first page with St. Bernard of Clairvaux in the place of humanity's displaced condition, that is, with fallen humankind, then it is only through honest, and yet also somehow

dishonest and transgressive, seductive and paradoxical encounters with the body that finally an eschatological vision begins to be revealed and anticipated through that body and in the encounters between bodies.

This book is writing within a distinguished tradition of scholarship in the field of literature and religion which found its voice among some scholars in Britain and North America in the later years of the twentieth century as it absorbed and transformed the unsettling insights of postmodernity and deconstruction. Above all the figure of Robert Detweiler in his now classic work *Breaking the Fall: Religious Readings of Contemporary Fiction* (1989) is heard frequently, its insights on the community of readers transposed into the world of the poems of Donne and Dickinson. But scholarship and literature never stand still, and Heit develops and sharpens this tradition further for his own time through voices from contemporary continental philosophy—from the slightly earlier Blanchot, to Nancy, Marion, Lacoste, and others, in their toleration and finally their embracing of infinite deferral and displacement as the only possible “places” for true religion.

The reader of this book must be bold, and must be prepared to participate as well as to listen and be instructed. It is about more than simply understanding. That is of the nature of all liturgical practice. Its community of voices are many, though through them the singular vision of a liturgical poetics shines with clarity, with its focus on the body, erotic, betrayed, broken, triumphant. It is a body known at first only through the ironies and paradoxes of the poetics, but felt in exchanges both illicit and hospitable. Like the literature of the gospels, such a poetics is utterly simple—when the penny has finally dropped, as Ian Ramsey (another unseen and rather Anglican presence) would once have said—but it is precisely then that the difficulties and complexities begin. No action of the body is without its consequences. For a true poetics is finally and insistently irreducible to any minimum, for it must be lived with and recognized, but only through careful reflection and the closest attention. Heit demands both of those of us—but the reward is great. This book takes the study of literature and religion onto a new plane, an enactment of what it says and a theology found in the very heart of the poetics of Donne and Dickinson.

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