Introduction

To our bodies turn we then, that so
Weak me on love revealed may look;
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
But yet the body is his book.[1]

Shortly before the account of the Last Supper, Matthew's gospel describes an ominous moment in a journey that will soon end decisively. "As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. Then he asked them, 'You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'"[2] Jesus offers a complex and confusing response to the disciples' gesture. The temple—a fixed place of religious identity—recedes into the background as Jesus literally walks away from it. In so doing, he distances himself from what the temple represents for the disciples, namely the space that symbolizes God's presence. Jesus' actions, then, convey a destabilizing narrative that subverts the disciples' wider liturgical framework. Throughout this vignette, the disciples do not speak; they merely gesture towards that which they understand to represent stability. In response, Jesus asks and answers his own question with a vaguely prophetic but certainly unsettling displacement of the temple that orients the disciples' actions. Every detail in this short passage fractures the temple's symbolic foundation, which foreshadows the total displacement that will occur during the Last Supper. Even though the temple's final destruction is yet to come, Jesus' actions and words begin to deconstruct the stable liturgical paradigm it anchors.

The above passage anticipates a symbolic shift from the temple to Jesus' body, a transition that Jesus clarifies during the Last Supper. Two chapters after he turns his back on the temple, the significance of Jesus'

1. Donne, "The Ecstasy," lines 73–76.
2. Matt 24:1–2.

actions becomes apparent when he describes a new liturgical framework during his last meal with the disciples:

> When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, "Surely not I, Lord?" He answered, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born." Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" He replied, "You have said so." While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."[3]

Jesus punctuates the substitution concerning the temple when he relocates liturgical hope in his soon to be broken body. Unlike the temple building that houses God's presence, Jesus' body provides a liturgical locus predicated on an absence. Jesus offers a promise that rends and replaces the temple's liturgical significance insofar as it initiates a displacement that delays the promise's fulfillment indefinitely. The betrayal that begins the Last Supper narrative thus parallels the narrative momentum that builds throughout Matthew's gospel, a development that deconstructs the established liturgical paradigm that the temple sanctions. The new paradigm rests upon a promise that refuses fulfillment within the text, a paradox that Matthew privileges throughout his narrative. This indefinite displacement constitutes a crucial textual effect that Jesus intensifies when he locates the liturgical promise in his body.

As a symbol, Jesus' body functions in a particular narrative and liturgical capacity. It conveys the foundational displacement at work in the Last Supper. Represented as bread and wine,[4] his body signals an eschatological promise that is not yet fulfilled. This substitution defines a traditional

3. Matt 26:20–29.

4. Already the disjunctive nature of symbols is apparent insofar as the body is a symbol twice removed from the thing it represents. I discuss this point in more depth in chapter 3.

mode of discourse wherein one thing represents another (absent) thing. In addition to this basic textual property, Jesus' body indicates a second mode of discourse: that death marks life's physical finitude. These two discursive strands intersect during the Last Supper narrative, which generates the particular context that this study examines. Specifically, in substituting his body for the temple Jesus enriches the symbol's capacity to respond to the finality that death marks. The reality of the second mode of discourse informs the first, a textual joint that through the first mode's substitutive linguistic function enables Jesus' body to function as a specifically eschatological symbol.

In its capacity to accommodate simultaneously these two modes of discourse, Jesus' body exhibits a distinctly paradoxical quality, which in turn displaces the promise that it conveys. By virtue of death's finality, the body cannot fulfill the promise because the body cannot escape the closure that death brings. Death's reality, then, subverts the symbol's capacity to articulate the crucial eschatological point at hand. Consequently, Jesus' promise enables its own deconstructive denial, an unavoidable effect that characterizes necessarily the dual concerns that the bread and wine accommodate. Importantly, this paradoxical effect is the dynamic that both Donne and Dickinson recover from the Last Supper narrative. Both authors recognize the dual discursive modes at stake in the body's symbolic role within this liturgical context; their mutual recovery of this particular paradox links their writing as thematic derivatives of the Last Supper's symbolic framework.

Defining A Liturgical Poetics

Defined broadly, the term liturgical anticipates Jesus' eschatological presence, which will fulfill the promise he locates symbolically in his body during the Last Supper. This definition indicates that the following salient features characterize the texts that this project treats: the absence of that which fulfills the promise; a consequent awareness that the paradigm denies the stability connoted in the presence that the promise anticipates; the inescapable reality of death as a part of the human condition; the possibility that through remembrance death can be transcended symbolically; a pervasive sense of displacement that results from the boundary death establishes between the promise's anticipatory component and the (possible) condition that results from the promise's fulfillment; and, finally, the promise's inability to excuse those who anticipate its fulfillment from having to encounter

their own deaths. Within a liturgical context, these characteristics indicate two concerns that affect the eschatological implications that emerge out of defining liturgical poetics in this capacity: spatiality and temporality. Jesus' command establishes parameters that define the promise in a way that forces the disciples to recognize an unavoidable condition: the reality that their own deaths will always subvert any anticipated fulfillment. That is, a liturgical context demands recognition that death frames the promise and, moreover, that this promise is not an exemption. As Jesus makes clear, his body must be absent through its death if the promise is to be made. Consequently, to speak of the liturgical is to speak of a response from within a condition, defined by death, to a possibility wherein the reality of death ceases to be human life's final feature. Put another way, the promise outlines a context that anticipates fulfillment as a condition beyond the limit that death marks, both actually and symbolically. This boundary affects necessarily the capacity in which a liturgical symbol functions within a text.

For Donne and Dickinson, the way in which death influences spatial metaphors becomes a stepping off point for the text to consider the eschatological implications that the promise offers. Death (and its effects) opens into alternative images and possibilities, which serve as the basis for deconstructing theology's sterilized readings of the Last Supper. Death displaces this text, but this instability enables a necessary shift to the body as the primary liturgical image. Both Donne and Dickinson draw on the displacement that they perceive in the Last Supper narrative. More specifically, the body's necessary encounter with death provides a basis upon which to account for and transcend imaginatively the body's finitude. The body, then, becomes the point at which their respective writing transitions from a purely literary context to the border between the literary and the theological.

Death also marks a temporal boundary that affects how a liturgical text functions. Death is the moment at which any person's embodied life ceases, a non-negotiable end that affects necessarily how any spatial images will unfold within a particular text. As will become apparent, the reality of death ensures that any hope articulated through an image—be it spatial or temporal—cannot override the definitive conclusion to life that death constitutes. Because it marks a literal cessation of ability to experience something as embodied, death is a disruptive force within the text. In the Last Supper narrative, the effect is obvious in each of these capacities. Jesus' impending death will separate him necessarily from the presence of his

disciples. Moreover, that departure creates a gap that the disciples cannot cross insofar as any hope they find in Jesus' words cannot traverse the absence that Jesus' death will bring. As a result, the symbol's promissory function generates a temporal consideration; the promise's fulfillment can only occur in an eschatological capacity that is necessarily beyond the temporal parameters that inform the text.

Based on these salient features, The concept of a liturgical poetics can now be clarified. In the argument that follows below, this term indicates a text that acknowledges and responds to the human condition by anticipating the presence that fulfills the promise and, in so doing, transcends death's limit. Such texts are poetic insofar as they respond to the instability that death imposes through thematic and imagistic features. The hallmark of a liturgical poetics is to re-imagine the human condition in a capacity wherein death ceases to be the final reality to which the text can speak. With this definition in place, it is important to identify several caveats. The definition of poetics in use during this project is not the only possible way to understand the term. In this project, a liturgical poetics indicates a particular kind of textual space that responds to a particular (though generally accepted) characteristic of the human condition. An awareness of this condition is present, always, in texts this project will examine. Variations in tone, theme, metaphor, or any other textual property do not affect the underlying dynamics that govern the text.

The Limits that a Liturgical Poetics' Paradoxical Character Imposes

Having defined these key terms, the significance of the paradox at the heart of the Last Supper narrative becomes apparent. This is a story that establishes a liturgical poetics' parameters; it outlines how to anticipate death and, moreover, it suggests how symbols that occur within this context imagine a condition that extends beyond death. More simply, a liturgical poetics envisions a possible condition wherein death is not the final word on human experience. Such texts articulate hope that death can ultimately be transcended, even if this release cannot occur within the text. This "latent possibility"[5] is a liturgical poetics' paradoxical, symbolic backbone; that which does not appear in the text ultimately sustains its promise. As Richard Kearney suggests, "it is divinity's very potentiality–to–be that is the

5. Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 1.

most divine thing about it."[6] By "rethinking"[7] this narrative in terms of the possibility that despite an indefinite delay emerges during the Last Supper, the analysis offered below coheres with the implications of the liturgical promise's denial. Significantly, such a reading accepts that the eschatological implications present in the text must remain unrealized, as the text cannot provide more than an unfulfilled promise. Consequently, Kearney argues, there must remain "a free space gaping at the core of divinity: the space of the possible."[8] This possibility in its promise and absence marks a crucially important feature that both enables and subverts the capacities in which a liturgical poetics draws upon the Last Supper narrative.[9] To counter the absence at the core of Kearney's possible space, the text enables an alternative response: anticipating a presence that will fill this gap.

The stress on anticipation distinguishes a liturgical poetics from theology. Another tradition, the *Ars moriendi*, provides an example that, in turn, clarifies how the latent paradox of Jesus' body affects the liturgical paradigm that emerges out of the Last Supper. Articulated most fully in Jeremy Taylor's *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Dying*,[10] the *Ars moriendi* tradition conceptualizes death optimistically as the point at which (eternal) life begins. As Nancy Lee Beaty notes, contrary to its role as the definitive end to humanity's embodied condition, in the *Ars moriendi* death becomes "the first of the Last Things."[11] Though she quickly adds that there exists the possibility that God might reject the recently deceased,[12] Beaty reads Taylor as emphasizing clearly that the eschatological possibility beyond death can be experienced (in part) before death, which consequently diminishes the capacity in which death dislocates the human condition. As Beaty notes, "Properly understood, *dying* is indeed synonymous with *living*."[13] In conceptualizing death in these optimistic terms, the *Ars moriendi* tradition assumes that the eschatological promise is fulfilled already and death

6. Ibid., 2.

7. Ibid., 1.

8. Ibid., 5.

9. Kearney offers a helpful summary on this point: "The eschaton is just that: a promise, not an acquisition. A possibility of the future to come, *impossible in the present* where the allure of total presence reigns supreme" (*The God Who May Be*, 16; my emphasis).

10. Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying*, Chapter V Section V.

11. Beaty, *The Craft of Dying*, 216.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 217.

ceases to mark a definitive closure of life. In turn, this conception of death glosses over the displacement and consequent anticipation that defines a liturgical poetics.

Beaty's helpful analysis of the tradition that precedes Taylor,[14] as well as Taylor's definitive literary treatment of the *Ars moriendi*,[15] demarcates an important difference between a liturgical poetics and the theology behind traditions such as the *Ars moriendi*. Her reading of the latter conveys the extent to which such theologies often depict the movement towards the promise's eschatological fulfillment by minimizing the disruption that death brings to a text (a fact that will become apparent in both Donne's and Dickinson's work). The Anglican tradition, for example, embraces the *Ars moriendi* because it "is 'in the world but not of it' in a uniquely tempered way."[16] This gloss sounds precisely the optimistic tone that distinguishes the *Ars moriendi* tradition from a liturgical poetics. In softening death's effect, the former alters the displacement that characterizes the Last Supper. The symbolic mode of discourse is privileged in a way that limits its ability to respond to death. As a result, the symbol no longer represents an absent possibility, but, rather, assumes the promise's fulfillment as present. This approach, which permits the text to understand death as life's beginning, rests on an assumption that the Last Supper narrative does not support.[17]

The scandal of Jesus' promise is that it lacks certainty; the bread and wine permit the reader to anticipate that the promise will be fulfilled because the text cannot overcome death's rupture. As such, death elicits a more sober response in a liturgical poetics, a tone that avoids the theological optimism that characterizes the *Ars moriendi* tradition. This strategy establishes a textual foundation that upholds the dual discursive influences of Jesus' symbolic body. By maintaining the instability that results from the latent paradox therein, a liturgical poetics thus provides a stepping off point to anticipate an eschatological possibility without shying away from the total uncertainty with which death rings life. Though an eschatological release from death is certainly implied in the notion of a liturgical poetics—and

14. Ibid., 32–53.

15. Ibid., 197–270.

16. Ibid., 204.

17. Questions concerning the bread and wine were, of course, crucial points of theological debate during the Reformation. Article XXVIII of Cranmer's *39 Articles* marks a definitive theological shift from the Catholic reading of the bread and wine as actually constituting Jesus' body and blood to the symbolic reading of these images. This point is of particular concern to Donne's liturgical poetics, which I discuss in chapter 4.

clearly so in the Last Supper—the point at stake in this study is that such possibilities exist only beyond the boundary of the texts in question.

A liturgical poetics, then, stresses the utter displacement that death brings to humanity's embodied condition. This is the particular narrative context out of which Jesus' promise emerges, which in turn constitutes an important thematic link between the Last Supper narrative and the liturgical poetics that Donne and Dickinson develop. Contrary to the assurance that the *Ars moriendi* tradition finds in death, Kearney suggests that narratives like the Last Supper imply the opposite of such optimism: "The limit experience of death is the most sure sign of our finitude. Moreover, it is precisely *because* we are beings who know that we still die that we keep on telling stories, struggling to represent something of the unpresentable, to hazard interpretations of the puzzles and aporias that surround us."[18] As will become clear later in this argument, it is only by confronting this total displacement that death brings to bear on humanity's condition that Jesus can relocate liturgical hope symbolically *within* a specifically embodied context. In unspooling this thread from the Last Supper, Donne and Dickinson write as minority voices amidst different Christian conceptions of death. However, their emphasis on displacement affirms the anticipation at the heart of their respective faith traditions and, paradoxically, constitutes the basis for their respective recoveries of Jesus' body.

Recovering the Last Supper's Latent Scandal

When discussing the specific contours of a liturgical poetics, one cannot stress enough the extent to which the notion of displacement affects the Last Supper narrative and, moreover, the importance of recovering this uncertainty. An early example of affirming the scandal at the heart of the Last Supper occurs in Tertullian's *Apology*. Reflecting on the images that convey Jesus' promise, he writes:

> Eternal life is promised in return. Believe it for the time being, for argument's sake. And then I ask you this; whether, although you believe it, you think it worthwhile to attain it at such a cost to your conscience. Come, plunge your knife into an infant, harmless, innocent, and helpless; or if this be the duty of another, do you at least stand by while this human being dies before it has really lived; wait for the flight of the newly-entered soul; catch

18. Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 231.

> the immature blood; soak your bread in it; feed freely upon it . . . Thus initiated and sealed, you will live for ever. I want you to say whether Eternity is worth all this.[19]

Tertullian recognizes clearly that Jesus' body signals a displacing point for consideration. The calculus at work in the Last Supper challenges the grounds upon which theology rests optimistic readings. Jesus' body articulates a promise that remains a problematic mystery by virtue of the complex interaction between the two modes of discourse discussed above. Tertullian emphasizes the displacement that characterizes the body's symbolic function in the Last Supper, which must, then, be read alongside the body's inescapable finitude. As a result, he recovers the scandalous disruption that characterizes the Last Supper. One certainly finds an eschatological possibility, a hope Tertullian makes clear by framing his passage with the promise of eternal life. At the same time, the images used to convey the promise displace the disciples (and the reader). To believe the promise, one must engage the text on its deeply unsettling terms and, therefore, resist the optimistic readings frequently found in orthodox theology.[20] Tertullian recovers, then, the influence of the second mode of discourse—death's actual and final effect on the body—on the symbols that emerge out of the Last Supper.

Death's Implications for a Liturgical Poetics

A liturgical poetics anticipates the divine in a way that, according to Jean Yves Lacoste, "death ceases to be the final reality to which we can reconcile ourselves."[21] Lacoste thus recognizes what is at stake in the liturgical

19. Tertullian, *The Apology of Tertullian for the Christians*, 26–27.

20. Tertullian recognizes that death separates the text from any eschatological fulfillment. He highlights, then, the basis for a liturgical poetics' demanding a particular hermeneutical approach that ultimately frustrates the kind of stability that the eschatological promise implies. By situating hope intimately close to death, a liturgical poetics speaks from an indefinitely displaced condition, which precludes any hermeneutical certainty. As discussed in the prologue, no text can extend beyond its own destabilizing limit. The texts in question, then, require a hermeneutical approach that accepts as a precondition to relating to the liturgical promise the impossibility of interpreting exactly what is at stake in this narrative tradition (a fact the disciples' confusion emphasizes insofar as they do not understand the implications of Jesus' words; cf. Matthew 26:36–46).

21. Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute,* 60. I find Lacoste's project helpful in emphasizing the displacement that death brings to the human condition and in this respect he parallels important thematic concerns within a liturgical poetics. At the same time,

promise: an/other possibility in eternity that transcends the finality that death imposes on the human condition. To engage a liturgical poetics is an experience that, if performed in full recognition of the implications and consequences of one's participation, allows one to anticipate the promise's fulfillment in a way that transcends the necessary instability that death brings. Importantly, this space is more than mere possibility; Lacoste is clear that within a liturgical context the image is "not simply a metaphor."[22] As a result, the images utilized in a liturgical poetics hold open the possibility that the Last Supper promise will be fulfilled despite humanity's displaced condition.

The holding open of the text thus permits a response to death, but it also emphasizes the reality that no text can cross that boundary. One cannot, strictly speaking, experience the moment in which the ability to experience ceases to be possible; death alters inevitably and irreversibly humanity's embodied condition. Consequently, the moments that precede death become important, as they bring the text into proximity with the specific moment of death and thus allow the individual to anticipate both death's definitive end of life and, in a liturgical poetics, to imagine possible conditions that lie beyond this boundary. Liminality, then, demands attention as a salient characteristic of a liturgical poetics. As will become apparent in this project, it is often from within these liminal spaces that liturgical hope emerges most clearly. At the same time, by virtue of their proximity to death the images that sustain belief in the liturgical promise soon collapse. Like human life, they cannot outpace the inevitable disruption that death brings.

In his *Apology*, Tertullian emphasizes that the body is *the* crucial image in the Last Supper narrative. Jesus' body faces a definite closure as it establishes a liturgical promise in response to this condition. There must be two theological modes of discourse when examining Jesus' symbolic body: its inevitable death and the promise that another condition is possible after death. The demands that the Last Supper's liturgical implications make on the body thus compound the stress that Jesus experiences as he anticipates his own death. Jesus' command during the Last Supper is, significantly, a poiesis—it must *be done*—a term that stresses the paradoxical role that the

his work is largely a self–contained reflection, which limits necessarily the coherence between his project and the specifically literary analysis that I undertake.

22. Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 37.

body plays in a liturgical poetics.[23] During the Last Supper, redemption becomes possible as Jesus anticipates his own bodily destruction, which in turn provides the metaphor that describes the Christian community.[24] Those who would participate in this community must *do* so; that is, they must commit their own bodies to endure the tension Tertullian describes. In both cases, the body serves as Christianity's central symbolic resource. Consequently, within the Last Supper the body emphasizes that the human condition cannot escape death, regardless of how the text imagines an escape from the parameters that death imposes. The story of the Last Supper makes clear the implications of a liturgical poetics: the space in question demands the literal destruction of the body.

Methodological Implications

Death establishes a boundary to human life and this project focuses on texts that are situated near this limit. These liminal spaces bring into focus the disruption that emerges from the symbolic paradox described above and, moreover, the effects this disruption has when anticipating an eschatological presence. Importantly, the argument that follows does not attempt to transcend this boundary; in limiting this study's critical reach to the eschatological *promise* within a liturgical poetics, the relationship between the argument's salient literary and theological elements come into focus. Consequently, there are two related yet distinct concerns that will not—by virtue of the parameters that death establishes on and in the text—be examined in detail. The first point recognizes that two distinct methodological strands weave through this project: the literary and the theological. In lieu of attempting to separate these concerns, the goal is to balance on the edge between these two discourses. Methodologically, this demands at times the need to elide concerns from either discipline. For example, how to conceptualize the body (in simplified terms) suggests two distinct though frequently overlapping possibilities. On the one hand, the body can function within a symbolic range that stresses the displacement that it generates within a text. This literary concern is, however, distinct

23. Kearney's reading of the divine as possible clarifies Jesus' command. He writes, "because God is *posse* (the possibility of being) rather than *esse* (the actuality of being as fait accompli), the promise remains powerless until and unless we *respond* to it" (*The God Who May Be*, 4).

24. See 1 Cor 12:7–31.

from the theological reading of the body in an ecclesial sense, wherein the body constitutes a community of readers influenced through its interaction with the texts in question. To contain the difference, the following statement summarizes how this project holds these two related possibilities in appropriate tension: the symbolic body in a literary capacity orients the text towards the ecclesial possibilities that the theological body implies. Within the texts that this argument examines, the outline of the theological possibility that the literary body implies can only be imagined within the textual boundaries at which this project stops. A realized eschatological condition is, then, outside the scope of an analysis that traces theological concerns only to the moments that occur right before death.

Importantly, the methodological decision not to extend the argument beyond this threshold and, therefore, definitively towards the ecclesial and theological implications that the literary body glimpses affirms a crucial link between the two concerns. A liturgical text enables the theological body to come more clearly into focus as it traverses the textual space that unfolds towards death. The specifically Western, Christian theological tradition that this project addresses posits a distinct eschatological possibility beyond death, which, tellingly, it conceptualizes in terms of an ecclesial body. The body's role as a liturgical and literary symbol implies this eschatological body, which, as will become clear in the conclusion, posits space for a subsequent analysis in line with the argument that unfolds in the following chapters.