Prologue

As he examines the Song of Songs, St. Bernard of Clairvaux describes in erotic terms how the journey towards God unfolds: "You will love with greater ardor, and knock on the door with greater assurance, in order to gain what you perceive to be still wanting to you. 'The one who knocks will always have the door opened to him.' It is my belief that to a person so disposed, God will not refuse the most intimate kiss of all, a mystery of supreme generosity and ineffable sweetness."[1] This passage highlights two essential features of this project. First, Bernard speaks to humanity's displaced condition, which can be summarized as the absence from God. This dislocation occurs when God expels humanity from Eden; as a result, humanity seeks to be restored to God's presence. Though Bernard offers what can be considered encouragement in response to this expulsion, there remains in his description an obvious barrier; the door reiterates humanity's displacement because it maintains the separation from God. Moreover, Bernard's anticipated response—that God will open the door—belies that this act has not yet occurred. God remains absent. As a result, humanity can only gesture towards God, who awaits behind the still-closed door.[2] The second salient feature in this passage is the distinctly erotic capacity in which Bernard conceptualizes both the journey that seeks a reunion with God and the act by which God's presence will be known. The ineffably sweet kiss counters Jesus' erotic betrayal[3] and, in so doing, consummates humanity's passing through the doorway into a restored, Edenic stability.

Bernard's description makes clear that texts[4] are seductive in how they speak to the human condition. For Roland Barthes, this erotic energy places

1. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, 19.

2. The theme of the door as marking a continued separation is an important feature of the Song of Songs. I discuss this image in chapter 5.

3. I discuss the implications of the kiss in chapter 6.

4. I use the term "text" to indicate what Ricoeur calls "any discourse fixed by writing" (Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 106). In conceptualizing a text as a discourse, I highlight Ricoeur's stress on the exchange between something written and the act of reading (see Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 107). This exchange experiences a significant rupture

particular demands on how the reader engages the text: "it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the stating of an appearance-as-disappearance."[5] The paradoxical quality that Barthes cites explains two important features that will be discussed below: the text's possible meanings and the impossibility of structuring the text's meaning into definitive hermeneutical conclusions. As Barthes explains, the instantaneous flash constitutes a "Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts . . . unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, [and] brings to a crisis his relation with language."[6] The text's blissful properties deconstruct what it suggests. The consequent crisis indicates a way to conceptualize the analysis below by accommodating through an erotic construct the latent instability that all texts exhibit.

The flash leads the reader across the text. This progression eventually reveals, however, that the text is a hollow space. Consequently, the flash's absence becomes apparent: "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing."[7] The text's allure proves to be deceptive; that which suggests presence begins the deconstructive process that the text cannot resist. Maurice Blanchot explains the consequences of this disjunction: "this all powerful imagery does not represent the truth of a superior world, or even its transcendence. It represents, rather, the favorable and unfavorable nature of figuration—the bind in which the man of exile is caught, obliged as he is to make out of error a means and out of what deceives him indefinitely the ultimate possibility of grasping the infinite."[8] Blanchot identifies a paradox that is crucial to the analysis below: to anticipate a reunion with God based on what the flash promises is to undertake a task that cannot be completed.

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insofar as the author is absent from the text and, therefore, shifts hermeneutical responsibility to the reader. In turn, the reader enters this discourse in its displaced capacity. The text, then, alters "the relation of dialogue, which directly connects the voice of one to the hearing of the other" (ibid.). This disjunction is one of many factors that indicate a latent instability in the text as the locus for the discourses that I examine in this project.

5. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 10.
6. Ibid., 14.
7. Barthes, "The Death of the Author," n.p.
8. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 80.

A consequence of this brief discussion of the text is to unhinge specific authors from normative labels and to complicate the exchange between the author and the reader. As such, Barthes' claim that "The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as . . . it discovered the prestige of the individual"[9] is a helpful stepping off point for understanding the text's impossible errand as it unfolds in a dislocated capacity. In releasing the text from the author, Barthes pinpoints two important concerns within the specific framework that Bernard exhibits. By virtue of its expulsion from Eden, humanity's condition is decidedly not prestigious. Rather, it undermines any claims to privilege the individual. This is a crucial distinction. Bernard exhibits a late medieval understanding of humanity that differs significantly from the modern paradigm that Barthes cites as untenable when considering the individual's lack of prestige.

The consequences of Bernard's analyses link together the two central authors in this study: John Donne and Emily Dickinson.[10] Whereas both

9. Barthes, "The Death of the Author," n.p.

10. There exists a strong literary and thematic link between Donne and Dickinson, which clarifies why these two poets are a central feature of this thesis. Both develop texts that embrace the deconstructive effect that pervades the Last Supper narrative. Textually, this emphasis emerges in the displacing images, narratives, and other literary devices that undermine their work in its anticipation of a fulfilled liturgical promise. Like Tertullian, they expose the latent, destabilizing features that preclude definitive—which is to say stabilizing—conclusions. Donne and Dickinson highlight, for example, how the body is an ironic sign of a coming eschatological condition. Images of sacramental feasts that occur in other poets (or even other readings of Donne and Dickinson) gloss over or fail to realize the purposeful irony that, as a liturgical locus, the body generates. I emphasize, then, the mis-reading of the Last Supper that occurs in Schwartz's analysis of Donne in making this claim. The distinction I am making between a liturgical poetics and a broader use of the Last Supper narrative—its signs, its theology, etc.—is precise. However, the accent that characterizes a liturgical poetics is crucial and it is this particular textual and theological feature that brackets Donne and Dickinson from other writers who appear to undertake similar projects.

Donne's presence in particular warrants a brief explanation. In establishing Donne as a textual cornerstone, I stress that he occupies a unique place in the development of English Literature. His writing establishes a new tradition—a public balancing of literature and theology—that did not exist previously (see Alvarez, *The School of Donne*). Subsequent writers in the English canon who exhibit similarities are, then, considered derivative of Donne's innovation. Moreover, Donne's unique position as a prominent clergyman and a literary presence in courtly circles enabled the criss-crossing of significant theological fault lines that emerged following the English Reformation.

By yoking these two figures together, I am not claiming that they exhibit exclusively the textual and theological characteristics that I stress throughout this project. Other poets—both their contemporaries and those in the intervening years—adapt imagery

fit chronologically within the epoch that Barthes describes, their writing mirrors the assumptions that inform Bernard's work. As a result, a common eschatological trajectory—one that resists emphasizing the individual as a stabilizing feature of the text—provides the basis for the argument below. Donne and Dickinson exhibit a shared tone in their writing and this resonance reflects the latent dislocation that affects both the human condition and the texts that emerge therein. For both, any notion of unity lies in the anticipated "destination"[11] that the text cannot reach. The kiss is still to come, a closure that the text must endure.

The absence of textual stability provides the point of entry into the liturgical tradition that emerges out of the Last Supper narrative.[12] In Matthew's Gospel,[13] Jesus describes his eventual, eschatological presence in terms that cannot be contained within the text and, moreover, signals the text's inevitable closure. Jesus tells his disciples: "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son

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from the Last Supper, utilize irony, or reflect on the body's death. The distinction between such figures as George Herbert and Christina Rossetti and the liturgical poetics discussed in this thesis is the capacity in which the poets like Donne and Dickinson situate their texts squarely within the destabilizing space that the body's irony outlines. The effect is to acknowledge the antecedent failure of identifying and sustaining hope in a promised eschatological condition. The capacity in which Donne and Dickinson draw upon the Last Supper's irony to indicate a possible condition that must, in the end, remain a textual impossibility is the subversive reading of this narrative and theological tradition that characterizes their work as a liturgical poetics.

11. Barthes, "The Death of the Author," n.p.

12. Throughout this project, I will use the phrase "Last Supper narrative" to indicate the eschatological arc that frames the Gospel accounts of Jesus' impending death. Consequently, I include as important to the specific Last Supper story the events that prefigure the central promise that Jesus makes in the Upper Room: through the signs of his body, Jesus promises that humanity will experience an eschatological return to God's presence.

13. The displacement that frames this text is symptomatic of the narrative trajectory throughout Matthew's Gospel. Matthew's text emphasizes repeatedly the displacement that Jesus brings to bear on the temple as a liturgical foundation. This consistent textual feature explains my decision to focus primarily on Matthew's Gospel in this project. The displacement embedded within the entire Gospel literally shakes the text and rips apart the temple's most sacred space (cf. Matt 27:51). Moreover, the symbolic and actual destruction of the temple mirrors the eschatological presence that Jesus' new liturgical paradigm—located in his body—enables through his death (cf. Matt 27:52). The initial decision to root my analysis in Matthew's Gospel instead of John's Gospel (which will become important later in this project) emphasizes, then, the symbolic shift that Jesus' body marks in establishing the promise during the Last Supper.

of Man."[14] Efforts to parse this phrase cannot keep pace with the immediacy of the image that Jesus offers. These words are certainly meant to be instructive, but the image of lightning—an effect that mirrors what Barthes describes—forces the disciples (and thus the reader) to grasp (at) a meaning that has already disappeared. This flash dislocates the text as it illuminates briefly the stabilizing presence to come. To use Barthes' language, the state of bliss that Jesus suggests must be anticipated as discomforting; the promise is experienced as a loss because the text cannot keep pace with the flash's eschatological implications. Clarity can only come later; the disciples are left to anticipate the Son of Man's stabilizing arrival as Jesus' departure shatters their expectations. Through the text's displacement, then, Jesus announces what is not yet realized. Importantly, this dynamic prefigures the more detailed promise Jesus makes when he establishes his body as the locus of this promise during the Last Supper.

The crisis of language that emerges in this brief passage cordons off what this book will and will not attempt. What follows below will be neither a strict literary analysis nor an exercise in theology. With respect to the former, lightning's simultaneity is instructive; it departs as it appears. As such, the textual examinations below will not engage in close, extensive readings in hopes of shoring up tentative interpretations. In the Matthew passage cited above, the implications of this flash clarify a central textual problem that this project addresses: the text's latent properties dictate that the promise can *only* be anticipated. The text cannot stop the flash's necessary and immediate departure. Consequently, close, sustained readings are untenable, as they require a sustained presence that the text does not permit.

In characterizing Donne and Dickinson as liturgical poets, the deconstructive approach below conceptualizes what is at stake in the promise Jesus speaks during the Last Supper. The text can only continue its progression towards the stabilizing other, the divine lover who will fulfill the promise he made to his disciples. This extension belies the text's unstable identity; the desire for this lover's embrace has already been rejected. This concluding ambiguity captures the essence of a text that embraces a deconstructive arc. Valentine Cunningham stresses the text's refusal to sanction a definitive reading as characteristic of deconstruction's critical effect: "The

14. Matt 24:27. All biblical quotations come from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), except for those found in chapter 5, which come from the King James Version (KJV).

great good of deconstruction has been to make readers all at once uneasy about easy meanings, and relaxed about polyphony, multiplicity, puzzle, and meaning over-spill."[15] As liturgical poets, Donne and Dickinson add ballast to Cunningham's broad claims. In the particular reading that this thesis offers, the refusal of any reading, much less an easy one, plunges Donne and Dickinson into a puzzle that exhibits the consequence Cunningham ascribes to the ability of deconstruction's ability to unhinge even the most well-trodden critical pathways. The result, in Cunningham's words, is that the text keeps "yielding meaning but also seems to keep withholding it."[16]

The limits that language imposes on a text cannot be avoided and, therefore, an intertextual conversation becomes a necessary methodological undertaking. The point of suggesting this model is to account for the different capacities in which the texts below strain under the indefinite nature of their anticipation. As an ongoing discourse, this conversational methodology embraces Blanchot's guidelines for engaging the text: "One must never be done with the indefinite; one must never grasp—as if it were the immediate, the already present—the profundity of inexhaustible absence."[17] Acknowledging the anticipated presence's inexhaustible absence produces a cyclical effect; different points of emphasis converge upon the limit that no text can transcend. Consequently, a critical analysis of such texts will frequently arrive at similar—or perhaps the same—conclusions. Practically, this means that at times the analysis below will appear repetitive as it explores the spaces that emerge from its analogous readings. This cyclicality is intentional insofar as it reflects the endless re-readings that a text must undergo in its anticipation of an eschatological stability that will never arrive. What can be considered a repetitive argument becomes in this capacity a critical analysis that remains open to indefinite re-readings, which, in turn, ensures that the discussion below minds Blanchot's caution: one is never done with the text's indefinite character. As a result, this project suggests an analogous relationship between the late medieval assumptions that Bernard exhibits—particularly the reading of the (human) body as displaced from Eden—and the Continental tradition's emphasis on Deconstruction. Both traditions emphasize that the text advances towards a presence, which, in the end, can only be recognized as absent.

15. Cunningham, *Reading After Theory*, 39.
16. Ibid., 40.
17. Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 79.

Importantly, this project is specifically an intertextual conversation. In his article "The Best Stories in the Best Order? Canons, Apocryphas and (Post)modern Reading," Cunningham stresses that intertextuality—especially when incorporating biblical voices—resists hermeneutical clarity. Because a text's linguistic properties ensure that it remains open to further and therefore different readings, the reader faces multiple interpretive possibilities. According to Cunningham: "Interpretation and ways of interpretation do not stand still. There is, and there will be (as there has always been) a continuous up-dating of readerly responses to the Biblical texts."[18] This claim does not relativize the analysis below so much as emphasize the particularity with which writers establish their own intertextual relationship with biblical material. Cunningham's caution encourages one to avoid critical bias based either on what texts an author draws upon, or on the specific links they develop between biblical material and their own writing. Consequently, this project suggests a further particularity, which should not be read as excluding necessarily other analyses. Plural hermeneutical points of entry[19] encourage sustained—and therefore different—readings in response to the text's allure. The analysis that follows, then, is one of many possible readings.

These introductory remarks clarify both why the argument below is not an exercise in theology and, moreover, how traversing the boundaries between literature and theology can enrich what could be dismissed as a hermeneutically dislocated exercise. Theology demands specificity and a point of emphasis that is untenable in light of the methodological concerns discussed above. The Last Supper's anticipatory implications necessarily displace the text, which in turn resists the kind of tidy readings frequently found in theology's storehouse. Consequently, efforts to conceptualize the presence that Jesus promises must fail by virtue of the textual parameters that enable these anticipatory gestures.[20] Theology is an exercise in stability, which Barthes makes clear, is not the text's province. The analysis to follow thus stays within the textual boundaries, so to speak, insofar as it can only reach for the flash that is already gone.

18. Cunningham, "The Best Stories in the Best Order?," 72.

19. On this point, David Jasper offers an important reminder: "there is no privileged 'innocent' point of access to a text" (*The Study of Literature and Religion*, xvi).

20. Jasper offers a helpful summary of this point: "to write of 'ultimate truth' is to deny it in writing—for such truth, if it were ultimate, would never suffer the process of textuality" (*The Study of Literature and Religion*, xviii).

Tracing this absence begins in the "Introduction" by defining the concept of a liturgical poetics. On the basis of this definition, a close look at the paradoxical character of the Last Supper opens into the specific instability that death brings to a text, which in turn helps to stake out important methodological considerations. In chapter 1, this framework enables readings of Donne and Dickinson that highlight the specifically erotic implications that both draw out from the Last Supper. Irony's presence is a particular concern insofar as it is an important feature of how a liturgical poetics unfolds.

Chapter 2 sounds the textual instability that irony creates in more depth by drawing on significant figures from Continental Philosophy. The result is a focus on the theme of exile as a structuring metaphor throughout this book. Exile captures both the text's latent displacement and the implied return to stability that underscores a liturgical poetics' textual and theological identity. Chapter 3 brings these methodological considerations into conversation with the specific theme of the lilies as symptomatic of a liturgical poetics' dual identity. This image provides the basis for drawing on Derrida to articulate how deconstructive readings are crucial to a liturgical poetics. Moreover, the as a symbol the lilies emphasize how the body functions as a coordinating and displacing presence in the text. This paradoxical influence clarifies the link between Donne and Dickinson while simultaneously bracketing Romanticism from the argument at hand.

In chapter 4, an extended textual analysis situates Donne within the scope of a liturgical poetics that has been established in the previous chapters. Specifically, his concern for the separation of the body and soul at death informs his specifically erotic texts. By stressing the need to balance Donne's theological and literary identities, this chapter highlights specifically how Donne draws on the erotic body to anticipate God's presence after death despite the rupture that death brings. In a similar vein, chapter 5 examines Dickinson's frequent use of death as a signpost that extends her texts to the limits of displacement. This feature of her liturgical poetics manifests itself most clearly in how she draws upon biblical gardens to articulate a liturgical anticipation of God's presence after death.

Having discussed the primary authors in this study, chapter 6 discusses in more detail the specifically theological implications that the readings of Donne and Dickinson generate. The emphasis on the erotic body thrusts the text into a necessary betrayal, which both extends the liturgical promise spoken at the Last Supper and calls attention to the risks of a text

that emerges when considering any erotic body. In its risk this betrayal allows the text to endure the necessary closure that the body must experience as a liturgical symbol, a further paradox that the Conclusion examines. In the end, the inability to outrun the body's displacement ultimately extends the bodily promise made in the Last Supper towards its eschatological fulfillment.

This brief outline makes clear that the ridge between literature and theology can be difficult to traverse. Despite this challenge, this book relates to each of these domains intimately. In holding the two disciplines in appropriate tension, the goal is to enable readings that enrich both domains. The specific instabilities that characterize the threshold between literature and theology—what Christopher Norris calls the "element of undecidability"[21]—confound any effort to suggest definitive readings. The eschatological implications of Jesus' promise demand an indefinite re-reading of the text, which cannot transcend its latent dislocation. No critical project can bring about what is and must remain absent from the text. Insofar as Jesus' promise cannot be fulfilled textually, the flash must linger as the already absent suggestion of what a disruptive bliss might be: a presence that cannot be experienced but can be anticipated.

21. Norris, *Deconstruction*, 28.