

FOREWORD

Theology as *Anastrophe*

CHRISTIANITY IS FOUNDED ON unimaginable disaster: the death of God himself in the death of a man. But from the outset it was re-founded on the overturning of even this catastrophe. Unsurprisingly then, it has proved well able to undercut and survive every later twist of fate. Over the last two centuries its finality and even its truth have been denied and it has been increasingly denounced as a fiction, as foolishly incoherent, as a failure of human maturity, and a refusal of political responsibility. Yet as the current book explains, with an unprecedented scope and unpretentious directness, the most subtle Christian apologists within this era—often literary and often British—have simply accepted these denunciations, but overturned their apparent implications. Yes, Christianity is a fiction, is nonsense, is childlike and anarchic. But thereby it is all the more true, rational, human, and socially harmonious. In this way Christianity has come to be seen with a new intensity as not merely mysterious and symbolic, but also paradoxical in a strong and irreducible sense. In effect then, the cultural Golgotha now faced by the church has also proved the occasion for a spiritual resurrection involving nothing less than a deepened apprehension of the heart of the gospel.

Christianity is indeed “made up,” but then fiction alone is able to complete our enigmatic world through speculation. Fiction alone is able to probe the limits of our apprehensions of reality and to expose the ways in which every such apprehension is itself fictionally limited, the ways in which our given reality may itself be a shadowy story, and to suggest that

more ultimate reality may involve a coincidence of truth with myth or fairy-tale. Much has already been written upon the new sense of the importance of the imagination for religion, ever since Schelling and Coleridge.

Josephine Gabelman supplements such reflection, but more centrally focuses upon the less well theologically-explored issue of nonsense. This permits her to see a profound theological significance in the writings of Lewis Carroll (as much as in the more “romantic” imaginative fictions of his friend George MacDonald) and to engage with his teasing questionings of the bounds of sense and logic. For Gabelman, nonsense can be considered with respect to human theory, to human practice, and to the phases of humanity both in time and in relation to eternity.

In relation to theory she provides a comprehensive account of the ways in which nearly all the main Christian teachings concerning Trinity, creation, fall, redemption, and eschatology seem to exhibit strong instances of paradox. She robustly defends the case of Chesterton and others (Kierkegaard and Péguy, for example) that these instances cannot be reduced to merely apparent paradox. Instead, they exhibit “real contradiction”—ultimately traceable, one could argue, to a pure but not pantheist monotheism, which sees God as irreducibly all in all, and yet (incomprehensibly) able to admit an “other” alongside of himself. The otherness of this other, the freedom of this other, the distance of this other, and the separateness of this other, even within the incarnate union of God with the other to God, cannot after all be seen as denying the equal identity of this other with God, nor her command by God, nor her absolute intimacy with God, and nor finally the personal identity of Christ’s manhood with his divinity. To deny these things, in accordance with a theological rationalism, is demonstrably to enter into heresy, as Gabelman lucidly insists.

Thus it turns out that orthodoxy has always been nonsense. In the face of atheist accusers, we have turned back to the Scriptures and occasionally the church fathers, and discovered that, while they insist of the reasonableness of Christianity, they have equally insisted upon its folly. This implies, as Gabelman argues, that reason and its opposite, unreason, are themselves paradoxically at one. Again it seems that theology is, as Nicholas of Cusa first realized, “dialetheic”—committed to the truth of certain outrightly contradictory statements. This implies a rejection of the coincidence of the rational with the real and a priority for the latter. The radical realism of Christianity suggests that aspects of the real can only be felt, intuited, or imagined. Or even invoked through nonsense—statements that may be at once unsettling in a purgative way and yet equally propositional in a manner that logic fails to grasp.

Here Gabelman gently locates an ambiguity within postmodern thought. Its recognition of the paradoxical hovers between a negative deconstruction that removes the possibility of the seriously meaningful with a kind of manic laughter on the one hand, and a positive embrace of the “impossible” as indeed one aspect of the real on the other. If this be the case (as is more allowed by the new spirit of “speculative realism” currently in fashion) then, as “radically orthodox” thinkers like Catherine Pickstock (much cited by Gabelman) have insisted, it must also be the case that the impossible analogically manifests itself—as paradoxically at once close and distant—through the possible, if it be, as real, more than a mere sublime horizon. Thus, for Gabelman the luring horizon of nonsense at once evermore beckons and evermore recedes, up to and including the beatific vision itself.

To see this is, for her, also to see that only Christianity outplays the reign of the serious. For a secular person, the “serious” insertion into a random, meaningless world of human sense and of human justice is, understandably, the first and last word—and an inevitably political word. But if, for faith, the original given and unfallen world (which is still more truly there than the fallen world, as Gabelman “Platonically” affirms, after Berdyaev) is pure gift, pure abundant play without any further sense, point, or purpose, then levity is more serious than the serious, more grave than the grave. Thus, as Gabelman puts it, with great acuity: “For the Christian it is a duty not to take reality too seriously, but from a secular point of view, deconstructing the seriousness of a subject could be taken as a devaluation of meaning” (189). Just for this reason, one could add, the postmodern is ambivalently caught between a tragic skepticism and an irresponsible ludicity. Theology, by contrast, can offer a ludic responsibility, or rather, lucid grounds for the non-necessity of the responsible, in any ultimate terms.

This book then offers a trenchant account of the irreducibly dialethic character of Christian thought. There exist strong paradoxes of sense and not merely of language, in the end because the finite depends upon the infinite, which alone fully exists, even though the finite (somehow) also exists in participatory dependence upon it. The consequent paradoxicality of finite existence itself is indicated by the primacy of the temporal, for which an ordered, consequent logical sequence itself depends upon the “impossible” co-inherence of past, present, and future moments. Christian teaching records and intensifies these intra-temporal paradoxes also: we are fully in Christ and yet ourselves; salvation is both already and not-yet; in Christ we are fully innocent and yet remain sinners. (One can note here how any merely “imputational” account of grace is precisely a rationalist attempt to reduce paradox.) The Christian stress on salvation by the preached word also underscores, as Gabelman argues, a paradoxicality of language, rather

than sense that is yet itself irreducible to linguistic appearance: namely the way in which words are at human command and yet always command us. Therefore, even, or even most of all, Christian words turn out to mean more and sometimes the opposite of what was first intended. Language thereby also reveals a controlling surplus of the infinite at the very heart of finite freedom—not as thwarting it, but as strangely confirming it.

But if nonsense is theory then it is also—as in the *Alice* books—practice. The anti-practice of anarchy. As Gabelman argues, Christian anarchy does not mean either an assertion of individual autonomy, nor of ontological disorder, because such secular theories remain normative and therefore not genuinely anarchical. Instead, Christianity opens out the only possible creed of anarchy as linked to a suspense of law and an interval between different legal orders. Through a fine defence and elaboration of Berdyaev, Gabelman argues that the true anarchic condition is to live between the relativization of the law of Caesar on the one hand and the coming of the kingdom of Christ on the other. As she rightly argues, the Russian sage was not here proposing (at least at his best, as she allows) a gnostic retreat into a private space in default of the final polity's arrival, but rather saw "anarchy" as paradoxically distilled within the mingling of an always lingering Caesarian law on the one hand and the new law of the gospel on the other. Since all human law is deluded in its claim to have found a remedy against sin, and the violence of human law only compounds such sin, there can be no doubt that, for the gospel, secular legitimacy is in a sense "over." Yet equally, as for Paul, a certain legitimacy for the law persists in time as long as the effects of the fall, while the other order, the disordered order of the gospel polity, is now but partially intuited and exercised. Indeed its operation of purely positive joy is paradoxically only exhibited through the suffering and endurance of the old order, whose privacy and ultimacy is yet refused—hence the levity of the martyrs.

For Gabelman the church is the social occupancy of this "anarchic moment wherein the supreme reign is not visibly constituted, in a world where the ruling power is not actually ruling" (123). Just for this reason its liturgical celebrations always exceed in purpose any mere "purpose"—even if this be the rescuing of the poor and the securing of social justice. To subordinate the latter to the former would be to instrumentalize present individuals and to deny the ultimacy of fulfilling play beyond the necessary but still too serious work of making amends and remedying defects. Thus, in contrast to secular expectations and continual sacrifice of the present, the church is the anticipation of the kingdom as paradoxically fully present now in its mere rumouredness.

Within time, human life has its phases, and especially the growth from childhood to maturity. But if nonsense has a certain Christian priority over sense, then the time of babbling, of infancy, has also a certain priority over adulthood. Only since George MacDonald and others has the astounding gospel demand that we become again like children been more fully explored. Childhood is no mere human phase, but the crucial phase, and even coincides with the human span as a whole, since pure wonder is more crucial than critique, grateful reception than ordering command, original simple initiation than development and creativity than theoretical detachment. In conscious agreement with Barth and Moltmann, Gabelman insists that we are first of all children and not autonomous adults in relation to God and that only a non-consideration of the Trinity would regard this view as patriarchal oppression on an ontological scale. For if one takes the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation together, then one sees that God is in some way eternally a child, even eternally a baby. God is only the initiating, commanding Father because he is also and to the same extent the receptive, obedient and trusting Son. The key paradox is that it is in this original trust and reception that there is also original outgoing, original creation, establishment, and affirmation. For God the Father has no word to utter before the Word of the Son and yet that word is from the outset pure response and pure loyalty. Impossible to understand! But as Gabelman argues, this gives the most radical meaning to Christian anarchy. In the beginning was *not* the beginning, not the voice or will of cosmic command, but always already the word, the interpretative response, that which comes *after* the beginning, the *an-archic*. Thus, paradoxically in the very (thereby denied) beginning there was the infinite plurality of unlicensed creative response. Before order there was a harmonious disorder; before sense an unrestricted sense-making nonsense.

Throughout this book, Gabelman continuously grasps that ontological paradox has been entirely overlaid by contingent historical, ethical paradox. All we know of the world is its untrue, fallen aspect. Therefore we know it only as false nonsense. But this false nonsense always poses as true, restricted sense, and indeed this is the devilish essence of the world's lapse. So apparent sense must be exposed and mocked as derisory nonsense—as by Alice, the child confronted by multiple fools, unlike (as Gabelman points out) the many actors confronted by one fool in Renaissance plays. But it can only be adequately mocked in the name of the true, infinite nonsense as we pass from a spirit of satire to that of pure hilarity. So a certain nonsense must be exposed and refused; a certain other nonsense must be embraced as therapy and exposure of the arbitrariness of conventions; but finally this other nonsense must be teleologically embraced as at least an intimation of

a higher propositional truth, beyond the law of contradiction. As ceaseless *anastrophe* (as in Christ's overturning of the tables in the temple), following Gabelman's suggestion, or re-ordering of sentential, temporal, and ontological sequence: a kind of ceaseless and "randomly" redone *anakaphalaiosis*.

Once again, the most ultimate response of secularity to Lewis Carroll's nonsense has to be serious: has to undo it, has to see it as an indirect therapeutic means to further finite sense. But this is to see no difference between the fool and the lunatic, as Gabelman explains, after Jean-Yves Lacoste. The fool does not fail lunatically to reach, but intentionally breaches the normative bounds of the finitely serious in the name of the uncontainable sense of the infinite. And what is more, following the paradox of linguistic usage itself, nonsense renders this witness, even without intent, in such a way that it cannot fail to be theological, even without the intervention of the theologian.

This book begins with an invocation of Jane Austen at her wittiest, on the matter of balls and boredom, as the reader will shortly find. One might say that Josephine Gabelman has more boldly suggested than anyone hitherto that the Christian life, if it is true to the Christian vision, should be more like a ball than a conversation—however fascinating. As she says, "Christianity has an ontological warrant for thinking and acting in a manner of extravagant frivolity" (189).

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