

Ryan Netzley. *Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist in Early Modern Religious Poetry*.

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Ryan Netzley has written a provocative study of the devotional poetry of Herbert, Crashaw, Donne, and Milton as well as a challenge to standard literary criticism that seeks meaning and purpose. Netzley's study challenges both orthodox and postmodern readings of these poets' devotional works by arguing that their devotional poems are not representing individual struggles to find or bond with a transcendent God or an infinitely deferred God or a teleological purpose such as redemption, salvation, or understanding. In the introduction, Netzley lays out an interesting theoretical framework involving a discussion of the problems that the Real Presence in Eucharistic poetry, regardless of sectarian theology (Catholic or Protestant), poses for signification and the relationship between signifier and signified. From Netzley's point of view, although these poets' devotional verse does reflect doubt, pain, fear, and struggle, that is not what the poems are about. Rejecting the traditional courtly love definition of desire as a quest and lack, Netzley employs the theoretical model of Deleuze and Guattari in which desire is not conceived of as a lack with unattainable goals (an inaccessible or transcendent God), but instead as a phenomenon devoid of goal and intention. From this perspective, these poets are proleptically exhibiting devotional desire and loving attention to an already immanent God. The focus then is on how these poets desire and not what they desire.

In Chapter 1, Netzley provides a reading of Herbert's Eucharistic poetry in which the act of reading and not interpretation is the model for the soul's devotional activity. Through close readings of "Love (III)," "The H. Communion," and "The Banquet," among others, Netzley argues that Herbert desires and responds to an immanent deity by offering the reader an immanent deity that they can take and love through the affective experience of the poem, which has no ulterior aim.

Chapter 2 focuses on Crashaw's desire for and response to an immanent deity by making it impossible to distinguish between means and ends, tenor and vehicle, or earthly believer and heavenly object. Netzley provides analysis of many of Crashaw's famous conceits in "On the wounds of God hanging (on the cross)," "The Flaming Heart," and "The Weeper" and other poems, arguing that Crashaw's use of excess hyperbole and synaesthesia creates poetry that doesn't just represent liturgical or devotional events, but instead participates in and enacts them. Thus for Crashaw, devotional desire does not lead to lack, but instead to an abundance of sensory experience of an immanent God.

In Chapter 3, Netzley reinterprets the traditional critical themes of affliction, struggle, and anxiety attributed to Donne's devotional verse as desirable states in themselves without the possibility of resolution and as appropriate responses to an immanent deity and divinely offered love. Using primarily "The Holy Sonnets," Netzley argues that Donne rejects a model of desire, anxiety, and a speaker seeking religious stability, and instead reconceives those as a loving fear of an immanent deity. The devotional point of Donne's religious verse is to preserve and love this fear as appropriate to the process of conversion in the presence of an immanent God.

In Chapter 4, Netzley argues through interpretations of Milton's early verse, *Paradise Lost*, and *Paradise Regained*, that in Milton's world of reformed religion and a monist and vitalist universe the object of devotional desire is a sign of a proleptic event that has already happened. Contending that the Eucharist was an unnecessary sacrament for Milton, Netzley argues that the sacrament was for Milton merely a seal of a divine actuality that is already present. By collapsing the future into the present, Milton presents a model of devotional desire and reading that are about love resulting from faith that urges our loving attention to an immanent God.

Netzley's study gives us a back-to-the-future version of a newer New Criticism that asks us to reconsider our own approaches to the devotional verse of these poets as well our own theoretical positions in reading and interpreting literature. From Netzley's perspective, we can no longer ask in class "What does this line mean?" Instead, of searching for a poem's meaning, we must focus on the process of reading for its own sake. While Netzley provides challenging readings of these poems, he ignores any contributions to understanding them that historical contexts might contribute.

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