

DANIEL MCCLAIN
The Catholic University of America

A review of Regina Mara Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. xiii + 187 pp. \$19.95 (paper). ISBN 0804758336.

Conceived as the sequel to *Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, in a series which “explore[s] the social and cultural legacies of ancient religion in modern life,” *Sacramental Poetics* turns to “another cultural legacy toward the sacred, not violent, but creative.” However, Schwartz is not targeting generic creative action; rather, she looks specifically to four near-Reformation Anglican poets/playwrights—Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, and Herbert—who in their poetry, and in some cases sermons and correspondence, revealed a fascination with the Eucharist. This fascination extends to Schwartz, too, who admits as a Jew that this subject is a strange one for both her and her Reformation poets. Indeed, the explicit object of this study is in fact the controversial “real presence.” For her part, she describes a tense relationship with sacraments in her preface, concluding that despite her “real hunger for the real presence,” (the play on words is intentional, as she notes several times in the book) communion or Eucharist for her is inescapably tied to the redemption of the very world itself; in lieu of that redemption, she refrains from partaking.

“Real hunger” then becomes the leitmotif for the rest of her text. “Rather than offering another reading of the cultural productions of the Reformation through post-Reformation secular lenses,” she states, “I try to listen to many people who believed that human pain was the legacy of Adam’s sin, that human nature was first made in the image of God and subsequently tarnished, and that only the sacrifice of God could restore it. I want to be attentive to how deeply felt the loss of the God was in a world once believed to be filled with ‘the glory of the Lord’.”

While listening to Reformation era British poets, the text gradually makes the argument that poetry assumes the role of the Roman Catholic mass insofar as it “carr[ies] the mystical force of the sacramental re-enactment.” Consequently, nestled deep in the bowels of the Reformation is “the irony that Reformation becomes the new site of transubstantiation of the Word” (120).

In part one (“Poesia Mystica”) Schwartz proposes a theory of sign and symbol that initially conditions her use of the term “sacramental.” But she also notes the

ramifications that the word sacrament and a sacramental mindfulness has on sign theory. When we consider sacramental efficacy, she suggests, we notice that “Rites make something happen.” And this bears upon the world of the poetic text, for, “A sacramental poetics, is not [just] any sign-making... for it entails a radical understanding of signifying, one that points beyond the life and presence of the artist, to manifest a new world; in Valéry’s phrase, a ‘second life’.” We might say that a sacramental poetics illuminates and increases the overlap between signum and res, sign and reality.

So, even though Reformation theology - insofar as one could detach it from the other cultural productions of the Reformation - more or less rejects sacramental efficacy in the Sacraments themselves, these poets harness a palpable sense of sacramental efficacy in their works so as to “manifest” the very union of God and man which had hitherto rested in the sacramental rites. This textual argument is particularly fascinating, as she notes, in light of forsaking sacramentality not only by the Reformers but also by early modern science. Ironically, as the emerging scientific culture demanded, God would have to physically leave the world, and moreover the Eucharist itself, in order to be truly omnipresent. That is, God cannot actually be in the bread and the wine, for that would entail a spatial limitation.

Yet, the flight of the divine from the sacraments leaves an enormous vacuum, Schwartz argues, in the realm of “communal justice and peace.” Whereas in the four centuries prior to the Protestant Reformation, the Church had used the Eucharist as a tool to centralize its authority, now the dismissal of the Eucharist and real presence in certain quarters of the Reformation inevitably leads to a sacramentalizing of political power *ex ecclesia*. Nations and monarchs expropriate the “real presence” that the Reformation had gladly disavowed in *ecclesia*. Here, Schwartz notes the English substitution of crucifixes on rood screens for the Crown’s coats of arms. “Reformers saw transubstantiation as not exceeding substance, but embodying it, and ironically, this vision—so thoroughly rejected as idolatrous—became the foundation of the state.” And yet, this over-realization of the monarch’s divine right does not concurrently entail an over-realization of political justice and/or peace. So, we might also say that the Reformation signals the quickening of political secularization, and hence identity politics.

Part two (“*Justitia Mystica*”) tackles this sacramental vacuum by examining *Othello*, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Schwartz showcases her acumen for close but original readings of texts in her analysis of the perversion of the Eucharistic prayer in the final act of *Othello*. Precisely because in *Othello* justice is thwarted and finally left undone, she argues, the play summons “a particularly painful craving for justice.” The literary ambiguity “between sacrifice and murder” reflect two theological ambiguities in the realm of justification: the first over the salvific difference between sacrifice and murder, and the second over the very means to redemption. Shakespeare, she argues, challenges the audience to justify Desdemona’s murder while also confronting the audience with the lived reality of their pseudo-reformed Mass sans real presence, and hence sans

real justice. When the Reformers eschew the real presence of a Christ whose sacrifice was “re-enacted” then and there, they appeal instead to a commemoration of the sacrifice. What is lost, then? In Schwartz’s opinion, it is a robust notion of “sacramental justice,” a divine justice that manifestly touches the world. Shakespeare’s theatre attenuates this loss by questioning the so-called “secular” space opened between the now divorced partners of the World and the Mass.

The chapters on Donne and Herbert in part three (“Amor Mysticus”), emphasize the radical degree of difference between the sacramentally invested Anglican poets and the sacramentally divested forms of the Reformation on the Continent. Upon reading these two chapters one might rightfully question how Protestant Donne and Herbert really are. By juxtaposing their sermons and poetry, Schwartz demonstrates the paradoxical situation in which both authors find themselves. On the one hand, both reject a Roman understanding of real presence qua transubstantiation. On the other, both make robust affirmation of the believer’s real participation in the divine life, and not merely as a spiritual reality, but one that a person experiences in concretely lived realities like sex or eating. While neither original nor controversial, this section of *Sacramental Poetics* enfolds two of the volume’s most significant contributions. First, by linking Donne’s sacramental and erotic impulse directly to the broader Christian sacramental tradition, Schwartz demonstrates that Donne does not relinquish a traditional sacramentality with an off-color eroticism; rather, he plumbs the depth of sacramentality to explore its reach even as far as the libidinal, or better yet, coital. Donne’s fascination with Love is in fact for Love’s sake. For Donne, as for the Romantics, Love calls the Lover to death to illuminate the boundless limits of Love. Unlike the Romantics, however, Donne’s Love also calls the Lover to resurrection as the telos of the sacramental cosmos. As Schwartz’s reading demonstrates, emerging from an orthodox Christology, the field of Donne’s sacramental vision is more expansive than the seven sacraments, encompassing the most intimate aspects of human existence.

Although Schwartz saves her analysis of George Herbert’s poetry until the final chapter, Herbert makes her case more clearly than the preceding three poets. Schwartz delineates between Herbert’s imagery being merely biblical (the scholarly consensus) or explicitly sacramental. Sacramental presence, and not just Biblical thematics, is the real setting of Herbert’s poetry, she argues. But what is more fascinating is Schwartz’s proposal that Herbert goes beyond a sacramental thematics to construct a theological poetics of sacramental presence, or, in her words, “a language theory that is virtually ‘sacramental,’ in which poetry is called upon to carry the performative power of liturgy—and this includes the evocation of mystery.” (119-120) In content and method, Herbert is the sacramental poet *par excellence*.

Shwartz’s explication of Calvin’s Augustinian sign-theory and its supposed impact on Herbert and his contemporaries is altogether too brief and risks not taking the High Reformers critiques seriously enough. Her reading of Calvin arguably casts him in a sacramental light that I am not sure she sufficiently

substantiates. Neither does she explore the nuances between Calvin's distinctive Genevan reform and the oft-times more ambiguous English Reformation. Then again, the book's thesis does not rise and fall on these minor quibbles. Overall, *Sacramental Poetics* provides an original and substantive contribution to the theological and critical impact these thinkers ought to have for further considerations on the rise and fall of modernity and secularity.

Schwartz's volume has much to be recommended, making a necessary contribution to what others have dubbed the "material turn," that is, scholarly analyses that do not reduce material aspects of particular cultures to byproducts of conceptual advances. Rather, as Schwartz so clearly argues, cultural images and practices clear the ground for conceptual shifts and developments so much so that without them "reality" itself would be unavailable. *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism* participates in this recovery of the material by offering a compelling demonstration of the way in which sacraments like the Eucharist continued to permeate the cultural mind of the Reformation, even well into seventeenth century England.

DANIEL MCCLAIN is a PhD candidate at Catholic University of America and Lecturer in Writing at the George Washington University in Washington DC.

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