DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5007/2175-8026.2023.e88289

Schwartz, Regina.; McGrath, Patrick J. (eds.) *Toward a Sacramental Poetics*. Notre Dame, Notre Dame Press, 2021. 289pp.

Keen Dispatch of Real Hunger: A Review of *Toward a Sacramental Poetics* (2021)

Andrey Martins[1*]
[1]Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brasil

When William Kerrigan published *The Sacred Complex*, one of his main methodological predicaments was that of interpreting a cultural object that essentially belonged to a discarded, obsolete image of the universe as to prove that, once translated to the coordinates of a disenchanted modernity, it might still have truth-effects, and for that project Paul Ricoeur's exploration of the sacred dimensions of signs provided a suitable foundation. Even as Kerrigan was fascinated by Ricoeur, he attempted nonetheless to maintain a critical distance at times: "where his work makes me uneasy, I feel that he is assuming a new version of the oldest argument for the existence of God – namely, that God exists because he is symbolized" (1983, vii). A former student of the late critic and author of indelible contributions to Milton studies, Regina Schwartz has recently turned her attention to the genesis and constitutive limits of secularism, offering innovative and fresh perspectives in the pioneering *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism* (2008). Intervening with perfect timing, she engages issues that have risen to academic attention in the wake of the "religious turn" of the early 2000s, the very moment when, for instance, Habermas coined the expression "post-secular society" as a response to 9/11 and Derrida's deconstruction similarly had a "theological turn." Grown out of responses to her first book, *Toward a Sacramental Poetics*, co-edited with Patrick J. McGrath, collects essays that extend Schwartz's insights about the metamorphosis of the sacred in the post-Reformation era. The volume is organized under five headings that cover

[*] Ph.D. candidate in the Graduate Program in English Language/Literature (PPGI) at the Federal University of Santa Catarina, and currently a visiting researcher at the University of California, Berkeley with a scholarship from the CAPES-Print Program. Focusing on how Milton's divorce tracts inform W.B. Yeats's views on the topic, his thesis analyzes the two poets' discursive fashioning of marriage and divorce in order to interrogate the nature of their specific understanding of the relationship between sexuality and ontology. His interests include philosophy, theory, and psychoanalysis. Email: andrey.martins@posgrad.ufsc.br. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2193-3216.

fields as various as translation, aesthetics, politics, metaphysics, and modernity. Opening in a polemical vein, the introduction challenges the hegemony of secular approaches in cultural studies to reconsider the category of the religious outside of the usual binaries of reason and superstition or knowledge and belief. The editors particularly claim to be keen on two issues that have loomed large in critical thought of the twentieth century: the relationship between sign and thing, and the possibility of experiencing the world without instrumentalizing it.

"Sacramental Translation" opens up with the contribution of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, in "Cloven Tongues: Theology and the Translation of the Scriptures." Departing from a close-reading of the preface to the KJV of 1611, the author contends that the dynamics identified by Schwartz in ostensibly secular poetry is already at play in the prestigious English translation of the sacred writings. The contributors of that project feel the impact of the disillusionment spawned by the Reformation, and attempt to reestablish a possible means of contact with transcendence through the "chastened re-enchantment" of their enterprise. Their work then does not only aim at faithfully understanding the precise meaning of the text but also has a communal and evangelical work to perform (22). Particularly important is the thorny issue of the conciliation between, on the one hand, the univocity of the divine Word and, on the other, the fact that translation in itself implies proliferating its division. In "Those Are Pearls: Transformation, Translation, and Exchange," Subha Mukherji pushes translation in a different direction. She turns her attention to early modern theater to explore how that material medium of communal experience participates in an aesthetics concerned with "translating," in however a partial way, the experience of "conversion" previously accomplished by communion. Attuned to the role of Ovidian metamorphosis to the evolution of Shakespeare's *oeuvre*, the essay traces how the shape-shifting, protean nature of theatrical semiosis performs a continual irruption of the excess of signification that constantly challenges the neat logic of exchange of the emergent capitalist society. Both in Ben Jonson and in Shakespeare, *change* de-stabilized what *exchange* tries to contain, and in that regard becomes a catalyst for the humble irruption of the sacred and Grace on the stage.

The volume continues, in "Sacramental Aesthetics," with the essay "How to Write like a God: Dante and Sacramental Poetics" by Stephen Little. In order to substantiate his contention that the doctrinal and practical shapes of the eucharist, whose status in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was more makeshift than during the Renaissance, influence Dante's poetics, the author reconstructs the history of the concept of *sacramentum* from its pagan origins to its reduction to the seven sacraments of orthodoxy. The central argument of the piece is that in the *Divine Comedy* the poet moves from a poetry of pure metaphor to one that, through its "literality," allows him to aesthetically justify the desire to partake of God's creative power (88). "Sacramental Poetics and Quasi-Sacramentals," by Kevin Hart, addresses more directly the implications and limits of a sacramental aesthetics, and in that sense might be the

most relevant contribution for those interested in a conceptual treatment of art and literature. Providing a helpful distinction between the doctrines of real presence and transubstantiation, he claims that we have to understand the phenomenon described by Schwartz not so much as the departure of God *tout court* but rather the decline of the emphatic creed in the material transformation during the communion, with its implication for the very possibility of an objective intra-worldly existence of the divine through ritual (102). The center of his essay nonetheless pivots around the poetics that necessarily follows from different understandings of the nature of sacraments. Discussing modern literature and the sense that God's absence is felt as a void "rather than a mystery," he surprisingly connects the hunger motif of sacramental poetics with psychoanalysis: "and with Freud . . . we have mourning when we consume the image of the dead beloved, and melancholy when we cannot quite eat the real presence of the dead" (105). That link is very apposite, since, after all, the withdrawal of the divine body that has to be endlessly "displaced" and "transposed" (161) in modernity coincides with the impossible, mythical "thing" that, in psychoanalytic discourse, becomes a compound of presence and absence from the moment that it is mediated by the signifier, and whose prototype is the means of nourishment (e.g., the breast).

The "Sacramental Politics" section starts with "The Sacramental Dilation of Richard Hooker," penned by John Milbank, co-author of *The Monstrosity of Christ* with Slavoj Žižek. As the rarefied topic might draw the charge of political quietism, it is to the credit of the editors that they included a section to deal with that complicated intersection of fields. Focusing on *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1597), the theologian claims that in the midst of several attempts to rethink church discipline, Hooker's theory is able to retrieve a deeper mode of Catholicity by "sacramentalizing" the political to some extent. By a carefully poised articulation of the power dynamics between parliament, the crown, and the church in general, the political emerges in the treatise as a significant and unavoidable manifestation of a natural desire for association whose full realization points toward the desire of a spiritual link with the "supernatural." Ultimately, the participation in the humanity of Christ constitutes the *telos* of the political. If that is so, one of the main challenges is to render in suitable terms how the different ontological planes of the infinity of the uncreated Word and its revelation in finite nature through the humanity of Christ "mediate" one another, such that the members of the social body in their finitude can partake of the infinite and irreducible presence of the son. Alain Badiou would certainly appreciate the sympathy to mathematics throughout the text (cf. 145), although he is otherwise critical of "presence" as a form of transcendence. In the following contribution, "The Miracle of the Eucharist and the Mysticism of the Political Body," Hent de Vris draws attention to the fact that recent theories of the "event" as the "'infinite improbability' … that eludes causal explanations" (165) share a certain homology with the original, pre-institutional nature of the eucharist as a miracle. That realization raises the question of whether politics does not have to rely on a minimal notion of "presence" allied with the awareness, however, that the recourse to such a concept might "perhaps be an illusion" (167). The main interlocutor here is

Claude Lefort's theory of the democratic invention with perhaps a snub at Laclau and Mouffe's "radical democracy."

Jean-Luc Marion lays the groundwork to open up new pathways in the theoretical intersection of theology and philosophy in "Going Around Metaphysics." Departing from the thesis that the ontology of metaphysics in modernity has inevitably led to an ontology of the *object*, that is, that "being" has been reduced to what can be schematized under a thinkable representation, he rallies for a return to *things* and their potential sacramentality. After tracing the inception of metaphysics and reconstructing the crisis that it has undergone since the nineteenth century, he offers his own solution to how thinking might surpass the impasses that philosophy currently faces. We have to go around metaphysics, for him, "as a sailor around a cape" by exploiting its "meta-," transgressive function; that is, its capacity to push beyond the horizon of each determinate scientific field. "*Verbum Efficax*: The Theopoetics of Real Presence", by Ingolf U. Dalferth, continuing the section "The Metaphysics of Sacramental Poetics," is the contribution most assiduously intent on providing a solid theological foundation for the project. While the notion of the surplus of meaning inherent to signs had been a fruitful principle in the other chapters, Dalferth's essay is the first to spell out explicitly that the project of a "theopolitics" is not fully commensurate with the concept of sign in linguistics. He points out that despite recent attempts to render Luther's views on the creative potential of the Word in terms of Austin's and Searle's works on performative speech acts, such approximations dangerously simplify and indeed falsify the nature of sacramental communication. Although theologians might enjoy the hair-splitting precision with which the dynamics within the trinity is treated, the general reader might feel at times that the discussion in some paragraphs is, alas, scholastic.

Lori Branch's "Dracula's Sacramental Prosaics and the Remains of Religion in Modernity," which opens the final part ("Sacramental Poetics and Modernity"), successfully throws a de-familiarizing light on Stoker's novel. Branch sees the world of Dracula marked by a radicalized withdrawal of the divine as diagnosed by Schwartz, although the predicament here is more desolate since the sacraments themselves cannot avoid but mimicking the very fetishes they fight. That is, crucifixes, garlic necklaces, and the sign of the cross are less remains of the divine than stereotypical attempts to fend off evil just as, say, compulsive tics try to contain anxiety. For all that, Branch nonetheless identifies in the margins of the narrative the possibility of an alternative rehabilitation of the sacramental character of signs. The poet Paul Mariani closes the volume with the moving "The Franciscan Hearts of Hopkins and Merton." Depicting the conversion to Catholicism of the monk and poet Thomas Merton, the chapter experiments with an imaginative rhapsody that amounts to a sensible meditation, if not homily, on God's manifestation in nature. Not accidentally wrapping up the whole volume, this chapter challenges the reader out of her passivity and tries to de-center her from skepticism.

Toward a Sacramental Poetics might not bring about the revolution in English departments that it expects; and unless the reader has a minimal taste for theological minutiae, the subject might often seem dry. At the same time, it is impossible to read Milton, Shakespeare, or Jonson the same way after the brilliant readings in the earlier book and the insightful literary analyses in the present piece. More dubious, however, for a project so intent on intervening on the debate about sign and thing, is the attempt to supplement twentieth-century linguistics and theories of sign-making with the church fathers, whose only apparent claim for being trusted is their venerability. In conclusion, the question that sacramental poetics poses but certainly does not exhaust concerns why there is such a tempting human drive to partake in ritual. A materialist answer would have to redeploy the theory of ideology in a non-reductive way, as the theory of acts/practices that engender an enjoyment that cannot be fully accounted rationally. Through that, a bridge might be established between sacramental poetics and materialism, since, after all, several twentieth-century manifestations of the latter have shown solidarity with a certain mobilization of theology. As Adorno (2007) affirms: "at its most materialistic, materialism comes to agree with theology. Its great desire would be the resurrection of the flesh" (207).

Note

1. Although critical of the post-secular turn, Žižek best defines the trend when he writes "against the background of the properly Lacanian notion of the Real, it is easy to see why the so-called 'post-secular' turn of deconstruction, which finds its ultimate expression in a certain kind of Derridean appropriation of Levinas, is totally incompatible with Lacan [...] This post-secular thought fully concedes that modernist critique undermined the foundations of onto-theology [...] Its point is that the ultimate outcome of this deconstructive gesture is to clear the slate for a new, undeconstructable form of spirituality, for the relationship to an unconditional Otherness that precedes ontology" (65). Schwartz's understanding of otherness is clearly indebted to Levinas and Derrida. See Žižek, Slavoj. "The Real of Sexual Difference." *Reading Seminar XX*, edited by Barnard, S.; Fink, B. Albany, State U of New York P, 2002. pp. 57-76.

Works Cited

Adorno, Theodor. W. *Negative Dialectics*. New York & London, Continuum, 2007.

Kerrigan, William. *The Sacred Complex: On the Psychogenesis of Paradise Lost*. Cambridge & London, Harvard UP, 1983.

Schwartz, Regina. *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism*. Stanford, Stanford UP, 2008.

Schwartz, Regina, and McGrath, Patrick J. (eds.) *Toward a Sacramental Poetics*. Notre Dame, Notre Dame P, 2021.

Recebido em: 31/05/2022
Aceito em: 11/08/2022