

ART AND THE BIBLICAL CANON

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It is recorded in the apocryphal book 2 *Esdras*, that God has a conversation with the priest and prophetic scribe, Ezra, giving him instructions which Ezra is prompt to obey, for he records as follows:

I took with me the five men as I had been told, and we went away to the field, and there we stayed. On the next day I heard a voice calling me, which said: 'Ezra, open your mouth and drink what I give you.' So I opened my mouth, and was handed a cup of what seemed like water, except that its colour was the colour of fire. I took it and drank, and as soon as I had done so my mind began to pour forth a flood of understanding, and wisdom grew greater and greater within me, for I retained my memory unimpaired. I opened my mouth to speak, and I continued to speak unceasingly. The Most High gave understanding to the five men, who took turns at writing down what was said, using characters which they had not known before. They remained at work through the forty days, writing all day, and taking food only at night. But as for me, I spoke all through the day; even at night I was not silent. In the forty days, ninety-four books were written. At the end of the forty days the Most High spoke to me. 'Make public the books you wrote first,' he said, 'to be read by good and bad alike. But the last seventy books are to be kept back, and given to none but the wise among your people. They contain a stream of understanding, a fountain of wisdom, a flood of knowledge.' And I did so (2 *Esdras* 14:37-48).

What we see here is the establishment of a 'double canon',¹ a scripture both public and private. The vast majority of Ezra's divinely inspired books are reserved for the privileged few, who act as interpreters for the majority. In other words, a 'canon within the canon' (to use Ernst Kasemann's term) can be seen as the strategic means to power of an educated few, its writtiness [?] granting it an unquestioned authority in the politics of Ezra's post-exilic Israel. One critic, Gerald Bruns, goes

so far as to suggest that, in spite of Ezra's claims to divine communication, "the power of the text is not intrinsic to it. On the contrary, the text draws its power from the situation which belongs to a definite history and which is structured by this history to receive just this text as it will no other".²

This process of canonization as the result, essentially of political power struggle gives rise to what is sometimes loosely described as the 'catholic' approach to a canonical text which is through the medium of a commentary. Those 'outside' the privileged few approach the canon, if at all, only through layers of interpretation. They listen to priestly pronouncements rather than actually read the Bible, or, at best, come to the text only under the firm control of methods of reading which actually prevent them from direct exposure to the the 'incendiary' text itself. The authority of the chosen few, or the 'Church' with a capital C, is preserved inviolate. Under Ezra, as powerful priest and ruler as well as prophetic scribe we receive the notion of canonization as the promotion of a text as sacred and binding - as a matter, therefore of power.

Thus in the authoritarian state like the Gilead of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the powerless subjects are forbidden to read the Bible, which is kept locked away, available only under the strict supervision of those in authority who read to them. The irony may be, of course, that in such a state, even the powerful are ultimately powerless, the text finally more than the condition granted to it by the politics of its sacralization.

An alternative approach to the text of the canon we may describe as 'protestant', which, un-Ezra-like, tends to play down exclusivity and the problem of how to read. Here again, power is a central notion, for protestantism assumes that the canonical book has inherent power to speak to the reader - any reader. Not now the Church, but the Bible itself is the final arbiter, though, as Luther was perfectly well aware, the reading of the Bible is a struggle won only when the Spirit takes hold of the reader in all its power. Luther knew that "the Bible has a wax nose",³ unless it is read from the citadel of theological certainty that it is truly the Word of God. In contemporary biblical criticism, the heirs of Luther are the 'canonical critics', Brevard Childs and James Sanders, whose project is deeply and disturbingly theological, yet bears witness to precisely the theological necessity of a more literary approach to the Bible. For if the catholic approach tends towards the canon within the canon, the heart of the matter reserved for the wise and good, the protestant approach tends inevitably towards what has

been described as the "working canon",⁴ within the whole of scripture, that is a selection of texts which are definitive for the interpretation of the whole. Thus, though it would be an error to suppose that Luther was concerned only with the right understanding of a single biblical passage, it is nevertheless true that Luther himself emphasizes that once he had attained a right understanding of Romans 1:17, the whole Bible took on a new appearance for him. One critic, David Kelsey, gives the game away when he suggests that although "canon" is not necessarily a part of the concept "scripture", "scripture" is necessarily a part of the meaning of "canon" (p.104). Reading is therefore possible, but it is essentially a selective reading which grants a hermeneutic key to all other reading.

Now, of course, as a cursory review of the history of Protestantism quickly indicates, the protestant approach (unlike the catholic approach) is highly vulnerable to the ambiguities of language, especially in translation, and to the demands of different readers at different times and in different circumstances. Sects, each with their own "working canon" abound through the changes and chances of history. For the particular power of the written word in this approach is to establish the self-identity of the community - a process which I have described in an earlier work as 'entextualisation', whereby particular uses of scripture are necessary for the shaping and identification of a community. The text forms the community which turns to it for confirmation of its particular orthodoxy. As David Kelsey puts it, "in declaring just these writings "canon" the church was giving part of a self-description of her identity".⁵ Not only may this involve a "working canon" selective from Scripture as a whole, but also a range of possible strategies of reading whereby the instabilities of the canonical literature are controlled. Thus, New Testament materials may control readings of the Old Testament, as in Rudolf Bultmann or Brevard Childs: in early Christianity, arguably, the opposite tends to be true. Karl Barth, on the other hand, tries to maintain the two parts in a dialectical tension.

All such strategies of reading are attempts to confirm that precious commodity, the "normativity" of the canonical text. In his standard Introduction to the Old Testament, Otto Eissfeldt categorically defines canon (claiming this as the fourth century Christian sense) as "a book which derives from divine revelation and provides the normative rule for the faith and life of the religious man".⁶ True to the tradition of Ezra, Eissfeldt regards the history of the establishment of the canon as beginning with the direct intervention of God and continuing through

history. The normativity of the text is maintained under the highest authority, and theology has continued to hold a vested interest in its undisputed role in the religious life. As long as the privileged reader - whether as priest or as critic - is in control of the reading process, the strategic possibilities are almost limitless. And so one recent critic can appear so liberal as to suggest the following:

Scripture is ... the primary source for all subsequent reflection that claims to be Christian. If we accept this, then we are ascribing some sort of normative role to the New Testament. We are not saying that the New Testament is always right; we are not saying that the New Testament is always self-consistent. All that we are saying is that all subsequent Christian reflection and development, if it is to be recognizably Christian, must relate to the New Testament witness in some way way or other, It cannot ignore it.⁷

I perceive all sorts of sleights of hand here. There is the implication of the "canon within the canon" or the "working canon" - read only the bits that the critics tell you are "right". To be a member of the Church you must go back to these books, and, by implication, you need the critic to guide you through them, that is, the modern equivalent of Ezra's "wise among your people". The catholic and the protestant approaches to the set books here join hands in a power game of control over the Bible reading community. The doctrine of normativity counters the vulnerability of the protestant approach to the uncertainties of language in textuality: these texts are divine in origin and have an inherent power to speak to the reader (under gentle guidance).

Robert Detweiler has suggested that we can summarize the traits of a sacred text under seven headings:

1. claiming or generating claims of divine inspiration;
2. revelatory of divinity;
3. somehow encoded or "hidden";
4. requiring a privileged interpreter;
5. effecting the transformation of lives;
6. the necessary foundation of religious ritual
(leading to the confirmation of self-identity);
7. evocative of divine presence.⁸

The net result of this in the process of canonization strikes me as actually not very far removed from the work of contemporary literary critics who, suspicious of traditional ideas of canonicity as an

instrument of power, have sought to establish the notion of canon in the reading of "secular" literature. For example, Frank Kermode, writing as an "outsider" to Scripture offers an apparently endlessly renewable series of canons in literature responding to the changing pressures of institutional life. His own critical attitude is very much that of a mandarin in his long-term project, since his 1975 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures, *The Classic*, of the redemption of the secular classic for modernism: lurking in the background is the sense of the privileged reader who is one of the wise among the people. Or again, much more radically, Edward Said, the steadfast opponent of the notion of canon, proposes instead a new canonical model which has been described as a kind of "canon in transience", a malleable arrangement of texts which adapt to changing cultural demands and circumstances. For all their suspicion of the biblical tradition, with its fixed canon, or their rejection of T.S. Eliot's notion of the privileged "maturity" of the classic texts which constitute his canon of literature (sustained by the great and good through the ages), in his 1944 essay "What is a Classic?", critics like Kermode and Said still, in the words of a recent commentator:

undertake to create a kind of secular Scripture, an imaginative narrative which tells the whole story about the origins, transmission, history, and interrelationships of traditionally valued and customarily neglected works of literary or visual art.⁹

This shift, initiated by a suspicion that a canon is politically exclusive and reserved (a reasonable enough fear following the forty days of Ezra), in fact is merely a move from interest in the canon as normative to interest in its function as narrative, maintaining all the while the sense of an inherited, enclosed and finally secret story. What remains is the power of texts and their narratives, interpreted for us by professional critics to whom understanding has been given, whether by the Almighty or by the Academy.

But there is a perceptible shift, though I would argue that it has always been there, necessarily, in Scripture, the energy which, more than the power politics of shamans, priests, prophets or popes, has sustained the biblical tradition in religion, culture and society. We can discern it in that extraordinary and much-quoted conclusion of Kermode's *The Genesis of Secrecy*, which looks back so sadly to Kafka's great parable

of the doorkeeper:

World and book, it may be, are hopelessly plural, endlessly disappointing; we stand alone before them, aware of their arbitrariness and impenetrability, knowing that they may be narratives only because of our impudent intervention, and susceptible of interpretation only by our hermetic tricks. Hot for secrets, our only conversation may be with guardians who know less and see less than we can; and our sole hope and pleasure is in the perception of a momentary radiance, before the door of disappointment is finally shut on us.¹⁰

The priest-professor sadly admits his limitations and longings, his failure of knowledge, and it is a terrible confession. But what here is demanded is a recognition that the terms of our conversation must be renovated in a shift from text to reader: not a dependence on the political power of the text, but a recognition of the politics of reading in a new and lively interaction between text and reader who abandons the futile task of waiting before the door of final interpretation which is never opened. It never has been, its truth, the "truth" of canonical authority merely the expression of a moment when a text becomes sacred when a section of the community is able to establish it as such in order to gain control over the whole community. Instead we must shift our concerns from dependence on the sacred text to the activity of religious reading, ushering in a different kind of politics which is reactive to situations of power and establishment, truly concerned with issues of freedom, the liberation of values, and endless, democratic exercise of reading as celebratory.

What I am proposing is a "canon" which sustains an endless plurality of readings that reject the notion of insiders and outsiders which has sustained canonicity since Ezra's ninety-four books (of which seventy rest on the reserved shelves), or Mark 4 which emphasizes the difference between the privileged insiders and those outside to whom everything comes in parables ("lest they might turn to God and be forgiven" v.12), or Kermode's *The Genesis of Secrecy*. Instead, I recognize that all communication occurs only within a context - that all is context, and there is nothing outside the text (which is not, as Kevin Hart has pointed out, a Derridean formalism),¹¹ and that all understanding between text and reader or between reader and reader is specific only to the occasion and determinate only within its confines. And that, as Stanley Fish has recognized, is fine, since he

complains that his critical opponents in pursuit of their privileged knowledge do not realize:

that such an understanding is enough and that the more perfect understanding they desire - an understanding that operates above or across situations - would have no place in the world even if it were available, because it is only in situations - with their interested specifications as to what counts as a fact, what it is possible to say, what will be heard as an argument - that one is called on to understand.¹²

As we move from sacred text to the notion of religious reading of the canon, we do not, I suggest, shift into mere relativism, but from the authority of the text to the authority of the interpretive community where communication does occur with confidence which has its source in beliefs which are truly communal and conventional.

Now this may seem rather like a new Reformation, but the difference from the "protestant" notion of canon is that it does not depend, unlike Luther, upon the privileging of text or particular texts as the final divine arbiter of religion. On the contrary, its model, idealistic and infinitely fragile and shifting is closer to Bakhtin's carnivalesque reading of Rabelais. A characteristic of Rabelais' style, Bakhtin remarks, is its tendency to disintegrate quickly in the hands of imitators, losing its universalism and "fullness of life". Once it tends towards the abstract it loses its vigour and its abundance. I deliberately choose Bakhtin's Rabelais because he uses it as a weapon against the deathly tendencies of institutionalisation, whether in the Church or in the state. For in the end the Bible also remains to be encountered as an antidote to the consequences of the processes of its own canonization in the tradition. Bakhtin reacts strongly against all notions of inside/outside, against the elimination of laughter from the religious cult in a condemnation which goes back to Tertullian, Cyprian and John Chrysostom.¹³ The liturgy and official worship of the Church effectively excluded all rudiments of gaiety and laughter in their authorizations of practice. For laughter is subversive, and excessive, opposed, ultimately, to 'the monolith of the Christian cult and ideology'.

Just as the biblical texts moved from story to sacred text, so the Christian Church adapted feasts, taming them for its own purposes. My sense is that within these "sacred" occasions remains an energy which is the true heart of scripture - that is writings available for endless

exchanges within acts of religious reading which continue through the tradition in spite of the periodic and continually reformed strategies which move to "sacralize" the texts in the interests of party, prince or priest. Robert Detweiler, to whom much of what I am saying is deeply indebted, suggests two German terms which may be central to the interpretive communities which celebrate such celebratory readings. The first is used in the fourteenth century by Meister Eckhart, and has been picked up in our own time by Heidegger. It is *gelassenheit* - loosely translated as 'calmness' or 'abandonment', a serenity in the face of whatever life offers. The second is *geselligkeit* - roughly 'sociability' or 'communality'. Detweiler sums these words up with the suggestion that:

Religious reading might be *gelassen* and *gesellig*, balancing our dogged insistence on interpretation with a pleasurable interchange made valuable precisely by a refusal to simplify and manipulate the text into something else, another statement.¹⁴

I should make it plain that when I talk of 'religious reading' I am not simply meaning reading in the narrow sense of literacy. That would, of course, exclude the vast majority of those through the ages who could not read in this sense. Religious reading is that interaction with Scripture which includes responses to visual art, music or drama. It maintains the vitality of the text, its narratives and stories, its lyrics and its tragedy through re-presentation and re-interpretation in conversation, worship and performance. It sustains its universality, and therefore its history, in a radical comedy of an affirmative community which may be parodic, grotesque, tragic, but always regenerative of these texts which form the Bible.

I would argue also that a "canon" consists precisely of those texts which continue to provoke and sustain religious readings. This will, from day to day, always involve "canons within canons" or "working canons", but the survival as the Bible as a whole (always a somewhat unstable notion, though always at the same time tending towards stability), depends upon a unity which exists precisely because it entertains its own deconstruction in reading and performance, a scandalous quality derived from its own excess as (in D.H. Lawrence's words) "a great confused novel", a living "art born of the laughter of God".¹⁵

What, then, are the characteristics of reading religiously? Deeply

playful, it is conducted in an atmosphere of celebration - of Bakhtin's carnival. There is nothing more serious than this, as a response to and encounter with text. It lies at the very heart of all liturgical celebration, though its power is too often usurped for institutional stability in the interests of normativity. But it is why, in the Middle Ages, the English drama, which began at the Easter Sepulchres in church sanctuaries slipped away from the sacred building into the market place where more vigorously the universal, synchronic text could playfully and tragically encounter the particular and the diachronic in the festive performance of the Miracle Cycles.

In such contexts reading ceases to be either a singular encounter of the lonely reader with the sacred text, or the imposition of a reading upon a passive congregation, but a group celebration in which all have their part to play in a genuine anamnesis or re-creation. Even in such a humble activity as my young daughters' nursery school nativity play, I recognize that, for them (and therefore for the devoted parents watching) they really are angels and shepherds, in all their clumsiness, embarrassment and excitement reliving the sense of the gospel narratives. And it gets harder and harder for us to re-enact this as we grow more demanding theologically and more cynical in community. So the text slips away from us, and we demand those who can interpret it for us.

Religious reading is thus one which celebrates the text. That is, it interacts with and enacts the text, both affirming its enduring importance and playfully deconstructing tendencies hermeneutically to reduce its excess and its ambiguity. We can describe this as a creative way of realizing the surplus of meaning in such a text, and its unwillingness to be defined by conclusion or dogma. The text is always more than anything we can say about it, and that is precisely its value, since it frustrates our claims to knowledge and invites us into a vision of which we are a part as we "read". In this sense, a text's "textuality" might be described as its "personality" - that which renders a person with whom we exchange conversation beyond mere definition, infinitely mysterious and always worthwhile.

Such a surplus of meaning is dealt with in the business of metaphor, whose energy is never spent and which leads us ever into new adventures of understanding and imagination. Metaphor bears witness to the excess of life in texts, and nowhere is the life of metaphor more abundant than in the Bible, which, I would suggest, is one good reason why it has endured both constructively as a canon and deconstructively as a classic in the literary history of the West. Metaphors, as Paul

Ricoeur reminds us in *La métaphore vive* (1975) are endlessly creative of meaning, metaphor calling to metaphor in limitless succession giving energy to that which theology and dogma tend to ossify. In religious reading, it may be said, we find our true being as Ricoeur concludes that:

the place of metaphor, its most intimate and ultimate abode, is neither the name, nor the sentence, nor even discourse, but the copula of the verb to be. The metaphorical 'is' at once signifies both 'is not' and 'is like'. If this is really so, we are allowed to speak of metaphorical truth, but in an equally 'tensive' sense of the word 'truth'.¹⁶

Finally, religious reading explores what Detweiler describes both as an "intensity of form" and the "irreducibility of form". That is, it takes, in its playfulness, the text absolutely seriously, without concern to coerce it for political gain, or read through it for the establishment of system. For it recognizes that this is all there is, this, if you like is IT, in the joyful celebration of an interaction which is universal yet affirms the individual, which laughs for sheer joy and confirms the interpretative community as a genuine community of the many in the one, never concluded and never exclusive. At the same time, they allow common utterance of that experience which is, in other terms, incommunicable and beyond words of definition, the experience of pain which isolates and finally kills.

Why these texts? My answer to that is because these texts, the books of the biblical canon, have the capacity like no other collection of texts in the Western tradition, to embrace a multitude of texts which celebrate their canonicity. The Bible should not be read exclusively and outside the tradition of art and literature in to which it expands and which it absorbs. This is, it seems to me, far more significant than all the methodologies of reading, and systems and theologies which have claimed the Bible as their ultimate authority. It breaks the encoded secrecy of Ezra's seventy books. As Northrop Frye once expressed it (though I am deeply suspicious of his own canonizing procedures):

The Bible is the supreme example of the way that myths can, under certain social pressures stick together to make up a

mythology. A second look at this mythology shows us that it actually became, for medieval and later centuries, a vast mythological universe, stretching in time from creation to apocalypse, and in metaphorical space from heaven to hell. A mythological universe is a vision of reality in terms of human concerns and hopes and anxieties: it is not a primitive form of science.¹⁷

Scripture gives rise to a secular scripture which both deconstructs, and validates by deconstructing, its canonicity. Let me conclude by illustrating what I mean in a particular example from the Gospel of Luke 2:8-17, which comes to my mind since as I write it is now only two days to Christmas. It is one of the most familiar and best loved passages in the New Testament. I use the Authorised Version:

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known to us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

In the early fifteenth century in Wakefield, England, the so-called *Secunda Pastorum*, or Second Shepherds' Play of the Towneley Cycle of miracle plays, takes this passage out of the sanctuary of the church and places it on the pageant wagon of the tradesmen of the town.

Most of the play is a delicious parody of the nativity scene in the story of Mark the sheep stealer and his wife Gill, who tries to hide a

lamb by pretending to be pregnant. The play concludes with the visit of the shepherds to the real manger in a tone of suitable devotion. Here brilliant "secular" drama becomes an intertext with the Gospel which places our reading of it in the heart of a comic vision that intensifies and "realizes" the biblical passage with a humane intensity that liturgy tends to attenuate. The worship of the shepherds at the manger leads us, readers or audience, in a worship which is a celebration of the text, and a situating of its spirit within the comedy of our appreciation and laughter. As Detweiler describes this experience, it "provides an avenue toward uncovering a sacredness of language always present in our liturgies, but largely suppressed in the reference-orientation of our worship".¹⁸

But we do not have to refer to the fifteenth century for the continuing energy of this moment of the gospel narrative. Here is a modern American poem by Peter Meinke, "The Gift of the Magi":

The angel of the Lord sang low
and shucked his golden slipper off
and stretched his wings as if to show
their starlit shadow on the wall
and did the old soft shoe, yea,
did the buck and wing.

The Magi put their arms around
each other, then with chorus line
precision and enormous zest
they kicked for Jesus onetwothree
high as any Christmas tree
and Caspar was the best.

And Melchior told a story that
had Joseph sighing in the hay
while Holy Mary rolled her eyes
and Jesus smiling where he lay
as if he understood, Lord,
knew the joke was good.

But Balthazar began to weep
foreseeing all the scenes to come:
and Child upon a darker stage
the star, their spotlight, stuttering out -

then shook his head, smiled, and sang
louder than before.

There was no dignity that night:
the shepherds slapped their sheepish knees
and tasted too much of the grape
that solaces our sober earth
O blessed be our mirth, hey!
Blessed be our mirth!¹⁹

Meinke continues to celebrate in the idiom of the twentieth century, more freely than the medieval playwright dare bringing his comedy into the Holy Family itself. Yet his poem maintains the unity through the ages of celebration, each poet joined to the other in being true to himself, and all sustaining the wonder of the Gospel verses, a wonder too often at risk in the fastidiousness of theology with its desire to protect the Holy Family from the humour and even the tipsiness of the everyday. The poets sustain and celebrate what Leo Steinberg calls the "modern oblivion" of sacred obsession. Art has never shunned this vigorous defence of biblical life which even such a one as Charles Dickens, in his defence of the "purity" of religion in the Victorian age, described as "odious, repulsive, and revolting" as against "associations" which are "tender, awful, sorrowful, ennobling, sacred, graceful, or beautiful".²⁰

But who, in the end, is the custodian of such things? Is it really the custodian of the sacred text who is more concerned to establish an authority of orthodoxy, a division between those within and those outside? Surely religious reading, and theology in the end is more than that! So let me turn, as I so often do, to the painter Rembrandt for a final word on Luke 2:9-17. In the history of art, the shepherds are not central characters until the sixteenth century, until then being generally only observers in the background as the child is worshipped by Mary. But in the humanism of Rembrandt the profound human mystery and warmth of the Gospel are fully discovered. In the great canvas painted about 1646, and commissioned by Frederik Henrik, the Prince of Orange, Rembrandt eliminates all angels or heavenly figures. It is an entirely domestic scene in which the shepherds kneel or stand, some huddling their arms for warmth, gazing upon a tiny baby in the light of a stable lantern and a candle which Joseph holds for their benefit. I am struck in particular by Mary, who is a real, capable mother, quite unlike the typical dreamy madonna of art. The realism of this picture

in no way detracts from the profound dignity of the scene, which is the dignity of a scarred, peasant humanity.

But, as so often with Rembrandt, I am even more moved by a later rough etching dating from about 1654, in which there are no concessions to the roughness of the stable, even to the somehow comic image of Joseph having only an upturned wheelbarrow to sit on. Here, the shepherds are eagerly crowding over the wooden division of the stable, one carrying his bagpipes, another holding back a small child who is a little too eager to see. In its utter simplicity and human warmth, this takes us straight back to a reading of Luke 2, filling in its indeterminacies without aggression and without imposition. Thus, in this tradition, the text of the Gospel becomes sacred not through the exercise of power, but through a textual empathy between the evangelist, the medieval playwright, Peter Meinke and Rembrandt. Of course interpretation is taking place, which will tend to create a sacred text, but it remains legitimate only because its interpretative claims are born out by the text which continues to inspire and be inspired.

Any sacred text, any canon, will establish a hermeneutic circle of interpretation and sacrality - interpretation creating authoritative (sacred) texts, and authoritative (sacred) texts compelling interpretation. But, as Heidegger recognized, if a hermeneutic circle is inevitable, what is important is not how you get out (which I doubt you can do), but how you enter the circle. Shall we enter with violence, and with the desire to establish that our reading is correct, or with the imperative that all others either read as we do, or even simply meekly follow without reading, for we alone are capable of such an act of wisdom? Or shall we enter with the poets and artists (and one should add the musicians, remembering the deep influence of such works as Handel's *Messiah* upon the popular culture of my own northern England), with humour and a sense of the ordinariness of the eternal and the humanity of the divine subject? Over the years since my days as a student of theology, I have become more and more convinced that one was taught to begin at the wrong end, with dire consequences of one sort or another.

If in our worship and religious reading of scripture we become increasingly uneasy with the notion of reference in a celebration where sacred presence is increasingly felt as an illusion, does this simply then spell the end of the sacred text. Has the canon of our reading religiously moved us beyond that "sense" which apparently gave rise to the writings of the Bible, the presence of divinity? Even as I finish, I am not sure that I have any clear response to that, in spite of all I

have said. I am sure that the notion of reading religiously is something we never actually realize, for we will always fall back into our old ways - any canon always assuming some "presence" whether that be divine, or academic or political in a narrow sense. But precisely this sense of presence which a canonical literature will at least suggest, should also inspire a suspicion which takes us not away from the text in the establishment of the authoritative "truth" of presence, but back more vigorously to the act of reading which deconstructs that presence and restores, between its immanence and transcendence, a *geselligkeit*, a sociability, and *gelassenheit*, serenity of freedom. Thus the canon both binds and frees, freeing us from its binding and binding us to freedom in the joyful act of reading. That is exactly what is happening in Rembrandt's pictures of the adoration of the shepherds. So in Meinke's poem we are free to laugh because we know this is utterly serious.

A few moments ago I referred to Ricoeur's sense of the metaphorical as abiding tensively in the copula of the verb to be. I wonder, in conclusion, if this sense of "being" is entirely adequate to what I have been suggesting. For the shift from an emphasis on text to the notion of religious reading takes us also from an emphasis on being to something much more deliberately suspended between text and reader, across the space made by reading in which is stressed "the importance of this nothingness which is neither being (a something) nor non-being (nihilism), but which is the play-between".²¹ In such play, seriously engaged in with texts that endlessly tolerate the claims of reading religiously, we begin to sense the true end of reading which is a reading of the unreadable, not in Kermode's sense of an unfollowable world, but in a reading which moves joyously beyond the claims of the written word in *communitas* and love. In prosaic terms, this is to realize that the canonical criticism of Brevard Childs and James Sanders is witness to the theological necessity of a more literary approach to the Bible. More specifically, it is an acknowledgement that only in texts, and perhaps only these texts, are continually evoked those celebratory acts in communion which take us out of ourselves, and out of all our strategies of power and domination, in order to come to the other in humility, friendship, humour and love.

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