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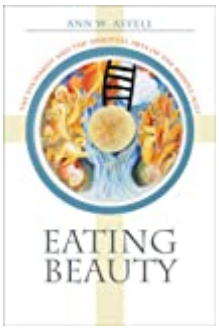

Ann W. Astell. *Eating Beauty: The Eucharist and the Spiritual Arts of the Middle Ages.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. xiii + 296 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4466-1.

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Beauty and the Saints

Ann W. Astell's *Eating Beauty* is a meditation on Christian theological aesthetics in which the author reads four strands of medieval and Counter-Reformation spirituality through the lens of Simone Weil's philosophy. Astell introduces her book by noting she wrote most of it in Washington, D.C. in 2001-02, a year in which the horrors of September 11, 2001 brought into focus Astell's fundamental question of whether beauty can be restored in a world deformed by catastrophe. She concludes with two poems by Tom Andrews that speak through the voices of Claire of Assisi and Michelangelo to consider the beauty in Jesus' suffering body. Between these bookends, Astell moves from Augustine of Hippo to G. W. F. Hegel and Weil, with four central chapters on Cistercian, Franciscan, Dominican, and Jesuit spiritualities. Yet, this remains a deeply personal book whose inspiration, as Astell put it, is the "enigmatic link between the natural and artistic beauty that is to be contemplated but not eaten, on the one hand, and the eucharistic beauty that is both seen (with the eyes of faith) and eaten, on the other" (p. 6). Despite her insightful readings of medieval and early modern religious texts and images, her project is consciously ahistorical, perhaps even anti-historical; hers is a theological reflection on a conception of beauty which emerges from the presence of Christ, a presence which she perceives in both the Eucharist and the iconic saint.

Astell's reflections are based on her argument that every "genuine" Christian spirituality seeks to restore "the paradise originally created by God through the Word" and thus ultimately can find an "original beauty" though the fostering of virtues that are "eucharistically infused and nourished through ascetical practice" (pp. 257-258). Rather than developing the historicized connections between asceticism and aesthetics to which Geoffry Galt Harpham has drawn our attention, Astell instead takes a transcendent approach, emphasizing "the virtuous activity of Christ Himself, present in the Eucharist as a work of aesthetic re-creation aimed at beautifying the communicant, the community, and indeed the cosmos" (p. 18). Following the philosopher Jean-Luc Marion, she links two forms of incarnational presence: the "faceless Eucharist," which is the one form of beauty that is eaten, and the icon, whose face points to the unseen and makes the divine present without full representation. For Astell,

however, these iconic faces are the saints, "distinctive 'faces' of Christ that cannot represent Him mimetically, but which nevertheless make Him vitally present in the world" (p. 258). These saints, she argues, have been eaten by Christ as they have consumed him, and, in their transformed lives, they have become works of art that encapsulate Weil's understanding of the dynamic and ethical nature of a beauty that contains within it both suffering and deformity.

Astell's first two chapters lay the groundwork for her thesis. The first explores the "theo-aesthetic" link between beauty, art, and eating; by "theo-aesthetic" she means both the analysis of theological topics with the methods of aesthetic studies and the interpretation of aesthetic topics from "the properly theological starting point of religious conversion" (p. 16). This double method allows her to link art, eating, beauty, and the Eucharist, for ultimately, she argues, "eating the Eucharist was â¦ productive of an entire 'way' of life, a virtuous lifeform, an artwork, with Christ Himself as the principal artist" (p. 14). There are many such "ways," Astell argues, each of which articulates a distinctive understanding of beauty "insofar as an ideal of beauty is inseparable from the ardent pursuit of holiness"(p. 16). The second chapter considers the various ways in which the Eucharist mirrors these "different images and forms of Christ's beauty in the world" (p. 31). She begins with words themselves. The "forma" or "species" of the Eucharist point both to its appearance and to Christ's real presence, in which the outward sacramental "species" stand in a unique way for "species" itself–that is, for Christ as beauty (*formosa*/ *speciosa*). Her discussion then considers four manifestations of Christ's eucharistic form: the Eucharist as food that nourishes the virtues and thus repairs the Edenic sin of disobedience; the human Jesus whose crucifixion deformed his body; the glorified body of Christ present in the Eucharist; and the mystical body of Christ as his Church, which takes a Marian form in its ability to embody Christ. We receive little here about specific medieval debates and theological disagreements; rather, Astell draws on theologians from the second century CE to the twentieth. She concentrates, however, on Augustine, a selection of twelfth-century pre-scholastics, and Thomas Aquinas, in order to consider how Christ's hidden presence is both deformed and beautiful and thus can undertake the work of "aesthetic re-creation" that beautifies the communicant, the community, and the cosmos.

At the heart of Astell's book is her discussion of four distinct medieval and early modern "ways" or "spiritualities," each of which "aimed at the artistic restoration of God's likeness in humanity" (p. 16). These "ways" are not the ideas and practices of a single saintly figure but a cluster of saints, artists, and hagiographers who present a composite of the saints who become works of art shaped "through an imitable asceticism into the particular *forma* of Christ to which they were drawn through the Eucharist"(p. 18). Each serves as an iconic representation of a type of this divine artwork: Cistercian monastic humility, Franciscan poverty, Dominican preaching and fasting, and Jesuit obedience. By clustering groups of saints and their textual and artistic representations, Astell makes intertwined moves. The first is that she considers the influence of one saint on another–Bernard of Clairvaux's influence on Gertrude of Helfta, for instance, or Catherine of Siena's influence on Catherine of Genoa and Rose of Lima. But she does not so much explore the influence of the historical saint as she examines a "school" of influence that encompasses later representations of the historical figure as well. The second, related move is that she confronts the historians' problem of distinguishing a historical figure from the saint of hagiographical depiction by refusing to make such a separation–her "saints" become ahistorical representations of particular manifestations of human restoration and virtue. Thus, she recognizes that Bernard of Clairvaux recorded no visions to which she can compare the visions of Gertrude of Helfta, so she uses Bernard's visions and eucharistic miracles as related in the *Vita Prima*. Similarly, she turns to a fifteenth-century altarpiece by Domenico Veneziano that pairs Francis's stigmatization with an image of St. John in the desert to support her argument that the miracle of Francis's stigmatization is analogous to the miracle of the sacrament.

At times, Astell's theological and ahistorical analyses provide interesting insights for the historian. For example, in a lovely turn of phrase, she remarks that Bernard of Clairvaux meditates on the scriptures as if they were the Eucharist, while Gertrude reads the Eucharist as if it were a text (p. 67). This image nicely evokes the process of Bernard's scriptural reading, although it fails to answer the question of how he understands the Eucharist. Similarly, Astell's analysis of the "three Catherines"–Catherine of Siena (d. 1380), Catherine of Genoa (d. 1510), and Rose of Lima (d. 1617)–depicts a particularly female Dominican lineage based on food abstinence, devotion to the Eucharist, and a form of preaching and reform through symbolic action. She highlights a Dominican "orality" that emphasizes both sins of the mouth (gluttony, slander) and restoration

through the mouth (preaching), which female Dominicans such as Catherine of Siena transformed into a symbolic preaching through fasting and eucharistic devotion in an effort to restore the Church. However, while arguing that other scholars have not sufficiently emphasized Catherine of Siena's Dominican characteristics, Astell places Catherine of Genoa within this Dominican lineage without providing any evidence either for this Catherine's Dominican associations or for her explicit knowledge of the life or writings by and about Catherine of Siena. Finally, in Astell's pairing of Ignatius of Loyola and Michelangelo as exemplars of a path of obedience, Astell places the progression of Michelangelo's artistic production within the four stages of the Ignatian spiritual exercises, an intriguing idea, but one that needs more art-historical analysis to be fully established.

Astell's interpretation of the Franciscan "way" of poverty and her analysis of Bonaventure's *Legenda maior* is especially insightful. She argues that Bonaventure created an icon of Francis "consciously crafted as a work of beauty in honor of the saint whom Bonaventure regarded as God's artistic masterpiece" (p. 101). Her reading of the *Legenda maior* draws on the work of Edward Cousins, Richard Emmerson, and Bernard McGinn, all of who have linked the subtleties of its structure to its spiritual message. But she adds to their chronological, thematic, and apocalyptic readings one that is based on biblical exegesis and homelitics; she finds in Bonaventure's depiction of Francis's life a meditation on the *Pater Noster* and the Beatitudes. In this sophisticated reading of the structure of the *Legenda*, she argues that Bonaventure made Francis into a work of art whose wounds seal his identification with Christ. Astell argues that Bonaventure likened Francis to Elijah not only to signal his own Joachite apocalypticism but also to depict Francis's own eucharistic transformation; Elijah, she suggests, is for Bonaventure, "primarily a eucharistic prophet" (p. 133). As a result, Francis becomes "the example par excellence of the effects of eucharistic transformation" (p. 135), whose miracle of stigmatization is analogous to the miracle of the sacrament, a position Astell supports with her analysis of Veneziano 's altarpiece (see above).

Astell concludes her book by showing us its philosophical and theological underpinnings. She critiques Hegel's aesthetics using those of Weil's, and places the Eucharist at the center of both philosophers' inquiry into the nature of beauty. Weil presents the host as a "convention" that mediates between human and divine; in its plainness, it bridges the aesthetic distance of Christ's beauty in deformity. It thus serves as the generative center of all Christian art by allowing a "self-forgetting subject," whose genius is an openness to grace, to consecrate the transposition of an image of infinite beauty into a limited quantity of matter. For Hegel, the Host makes Christ's love visible, but as a commemorative sign rather than a sacrament. It thus promises more that it gives and becomes the place where form and matter diverge. Hegel's subject is not self-forgetting but rather self-conscious; art, as a mirror of consciousness, departs from nature as perceived by the senses and depicts the ideal and universal, unmoored from all diachronic processes of becoming and from the deformities and ugliness that both Weil and Astell locate within their conception of beauty. Hegel's understanding of the commemorative nature of the Eucharist, Astell argues, makes it a "bittersweet sign of a loss of symbolic unity between content and expression" (p. 252). It foreshadows his argument for the end of art and its consumption by philosophy.

Astell's critique of Hegel further emphasizes a leitmotif in this book: her conception of beauty is rooted in an understanding of the real presence in the Eucharist. The personal nature of Astell's analysis suggests that, for her, this idea of beauty provides solace in a world deformed by catastrophe. In a work already broad in its chronological scope, it is perhaps too much to ask that she broaden it even further. But unacknowledged in her work is the larger question of whether theological aesthetics must be rooted in the particularities of a specific religion. In a world in which catastrophes are often intertwined with the exclusiveness of religious traditions, what should we make of this exclusive conception of beauty?