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Theology and Aesthetics: Religious Experience and the Textual Sublime

Introduction

The sacred word

Texts have always been recognized as having the power to transform their readers, for good or evil. In the early years of post-exilic Israel, when the Temple of Solomon and the walls of Jerusalem had been rebuilt, we find Ezra holding a public reading of the Mosaic Law. The effect of this reading is recorded in the Book of Nehemiah: ‘all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law’ (Nehemiah 8.9). Though Ezra bids them to change their response to one of celebration, the day is considered holy because it effects a change, a repentance, in the hearts of the people. Performed, the law communicates, and God’s Word is disseminated.

In Luke’s gospel we have a similar account of the power of reading. This time the reading comes not from the law but the prophets (the Book of Isaiah) and it takes place in a synagogue in Nazareth. Jesus reads, closes the book and ‘the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him’ (Luke 4.20). In the awe-filled silence, he announces the fulfilment of the Scriptures, and then, the tension caused by the reading breaks, violently: ‘And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up, and thrust him out of the city’ (Luke 4.28–9). Again, in the liturgical performance, the Word of God disrupts, provokes and initiates reaction.

The power of the sacred word to affect the lives of hearers and readers is a major characteristic of Judaism and Christianity. Reading or hearing the scriptures can become an occasion for revelation and/or judgement. We examined the textual aspect of this, the representation
of revelation, in Chapter 1. We examined the ethics of representation in Chapter 3, pointing out how the new models of personhood gave renewed dignity to the affective side of human nature. Here we will examine the experiential aspect in terms of the reading or listening subject. For the experiential aspect has been fundamental in Christianity as one element in the mechanism of repentance and conversion (the means whereby the atonement wrought by Christ is personally appropriated through the spirit). The experience of reading or listening to the sacred text is a necessary part of any doctrine of Scripture. It also bears closely on the doctrine of God’s calling, vocation, and the Church’s commission to preach the Word elaborated in missiology.

Augustine, thrashing about in the guilt of his own lustful condition, wanders in solitude about his garden in Milan. In a dramatic gesture he flings himself beneath a fig-tree and from there he hears chanting from nearby: ‘Tolle. Lege.’ [Take. Read.] He writes: ‘I interpreted it solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find.’ He does so, and a scripture so apt strikes him with such force that he can read no further. ‘At once, with the last words of the sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart.’ The effect of this reading is Augustine’s conversion and subsequent baptism.1 The relationship between reading the Scriptures and receiving grace (reading as a sacramental process, as a liturgical performance) is more than evident in the lives of the medieval mystics. To take only one example, in The Revelations of Divine Love by Julian of Norwich, reading the Scripture becomes a vehicle for meditation, prayer, visionary exegesis and mystic rapture.2

In different circumstances, which lack Augustine’s broad understanding of how to interpret Scripture, the effect of such reading-as-grace procedure can have devastating psychological effects. In the context of seventeenth-century Protestantism and the doctrines of the verbal inspiration of Scripture, reading the Bible for John Bunyan becomes a journey into the depths of paranoia:

‘I was followed by this scripture, ‘Simon, Simon, behold Satan hath desired to have you’ (Luke xxii. 31). And sometimes it would sound so loud within me, yea, and as it were call so strongly after me, that once above all the rest, I turned my head over my shoulders, thinking verily that some man had, behind me, called to me.3

The public liturgical act, evident in the Book of Nehemiah and Luke,