CHAPTER 3

HOUSING FOR “EXCESS”: PROTESTANTISM, TEXTUALITY, AND THE NOVEL’S LATE MEDIEVAL CAPACITIES IN A POST-REFORMATION COSMOS

Introduction

It will be our purpose in the present chapter to trace the Pietà’s invitation to unrecoiling encounter with pained embodiment through the cultural cataclysms of sixteenth-century Europe. Our aim will be to chart late medieval spirituality’s endurance within that “flattened,” textually hegemonic cosmos’s newly profane and “eccentric” materiality. In doing so, we anticipate the birth of the integrated, modern novel. What other cultural phenomenon can be said to more adequately house the common man or woman’s now-homeless desires to disclose his or her mottled, erotic flesh with dignity before the anticipation of the Divine and/or the community?

Transmogrifying from interactive wooden real presence to pagination with the coming of the revolution, we will propose the novel’s bracketed vigil as the fullest site of endurance for late medievalism’s (regularly poignant, joyful, and affronting) “presence encounters.” There, a familiarly wounded Christology had spurred imaginative experimentation with “ordinary” essences as never before. Contrasting this, the modern era’s sudden distraction by the potentials of mapped Cartesianism, compounded again by the Renaissance revival of classically consummated forms cannot account for the aesthetics or unruly excess suffusing the novel. What form so adequately reconstructs space for secluded, sensory participation with wholistic minutiae before turning again to the world?
Surely, the detailed sociopolitical, theological, and epistemological confluences energizing the sixteenth-century’s theological revolution is endlessly debated, much-documented ground. A comprehensive survey lies beyond the scope of this work; nevertheless, we cannot move toward the novel’s unfurling without glimpses of that era’s almost unquantifiable ontological shifts. It is our hope that recalling these spaces will sharpen our sensitivity to the subtlety violent hermeneutical gestures structuring our post-Enlightenment thought, and enliven us to long-abandoned aspects of our own being.

Celestial Flesh: A Shift in Incarnational Essence

Whether or not we permit Christian theology to consciously structure our current existence, its adventures have inescapably fashioned our present moment. Whatever the accolades of humanistic atheism or accomplishments of recent Western political activism, we would suggest that theories of the incarnation have undeniably fashioned our philosophical trails and social inheritance. We will thus make bold to begin our exploration of the sixteenth-century Reformation with theology. What we find is that a magnificent range of Christological debates quickly arose among the early Reformers. The momentous church historian George Hunston Williams avers that, amid the more celebrated issues of institutional authority and justification, the Reformation, at base, remained a dispute over the two natures of Christ. At stake in these theological altercations was the floridly pained, exuberant Christology presenced in the site of the *Pietà*. The incarnate God-man—lying three-dimensionally feminine, wounded, and defenseless before the bodily responses of laypeople—underwent pointed attack by the Reformer’s zeal for codified holiness and fleshly management.

What Williams records is the Reformers’ fervor to subjugate what they perceived as the visceral excesses of late medieval spirituality. This was perhaps most elaborately manifested in the hugely popular Corpus Christi parades. Countering late medieval spirituality’s sensuous, emotive, bodily playfulness was the Reformers’ espousal of the “celestial flesh of Christ.” The term itself indicates an essence at odds with the qualitatively finite and erotic nature heretofore celebrated. The most extreme espousal of this “celestial flesh” peaked in the writings of Reformer Melchior Hofmann. Unfurling a narrative