

READING, DESIRE, AND THE EUCHARIST
IN EARLY MODERN RELIGIOUS POETRY

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RYAN NETZLEY

Reading, Desire, and the Eucharist in Early Modern Religious Poetry

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READING, DESIRE, AND THE EUCHARIST
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Introduction: Desiring Sacraments and Reading Real Presence in Seventeenth-Century Religious Poetry

How does one desire a God that one does not lack? Seventeenth-century religious verse obsesses over the appropriate approach to an immanent divinity, the affective and conceptual responses to God's presence specific to religious desire. Once God is present and one is no longer wishing for or awaiting his arrival, there remains much to do. English devotional lyrics, from poets as theologically and poetically distinct as John Milton, Richard Crashaw, John Donne, and George Herbert, explore not just the preparations and predispositions necessary for a proper communion, but also the manner and practice of desiring God: not just what one desires, but the very nature and activity of desire that persists after this arrival. The Lord's Supper serves as a privileged site for such poetic meditations, in part because of the ceremony's continued insistence on a Real Presence in the elements within the ostensibly reformed Anglican ceremony, but also because of the event's intimate ties to controversies surrounding the operation of metaphor, signification, and words in general. When one desires presence in or during the eucharistic ceremony, one is not desiring a god that is absent, but rather one who is immanently, even insistently present. As a result, it seems necessary to abandon psychoanalytic and dialectical understandings of desire that insist that we can only desire that which we lack. Early modern religious verse's attention to the Lord's Supper enjoins a reading practice that is equally immanent. In a rite where a sign fully contains and presents what it signifies – the body of Christ is fully and really present in the elements – reading can no longer be a procedure for filling in or supplementing a poem with its absent, transcendent meaning. This poetry does not simply offer a surer, less ambiguous approach to interpretation, a more secure connection between signifiers and signifieds, words and meaning, a connection often

signalled in modern critical discourse by the concept of sacramentality: the indeterminacy of meaning is not the problem that the Real Presence poses. In addition, the eucharist does not put us on a chivalric quest to attain an end, whether that aim is salvation, pleasure, or love. Rather, the sacrament insists that God is right here at hand, a gift for the taking, and then challenges communicants, devotees, and readers to respond appropriately to this presence. Getting God is not the problem; taking, desiring, reading, and loving this presence, for its own sake, is the task that these lyrics set for readers. This book then outlines the affirmative, immanent model of desire present in early modern religious poetry and explores the consequences of this devotional desire for how we read seventeenth-century religious verse. The poetic deployments of the Lord's Supper in the late English Renaissance require a model of devotional desire that takes seriously these lyrics' insistence on the Real Presence of Christ and, in turn, force us to treat reading practice itself, and not the meanings that we glean from it, as devotion. Reading as an activity cannot lead to devotion, for this would simply be treating presence as a mercenary instrument. Instead, the readerly encounter with the poem itself, the line-by-line reading of it, must constitute devotion.

Instead of a eucharist that recovers grace for fallen believers, or one that signifies or seals such a recovery through Christ's sacrifice, English religious verse more often presents the sacrament of the altar and even desire for it as an immediate affective connection to the divine. Yet sacramental desire is neither a hopeless, but nonetheless satisfying infinite yearning, nor a system of exchange and mutual recognition in which God recognizes our gift as a return of his own gift. As Brian Cummings argues, within a Calvinist predestinarian theology, desiring grace can have no connection to the divine, freely given gift of grace: 'To allow mankind even a gesture of reciprocity in matching the gift of grace with some motion of answering merit – even if only desired, or foreseen, or conveniently called into being by the act of giving itself – seemed to Calvin to make it untrue.'¹ Desire then does not signify a fundamental lack in the devotional subject, but rather is a gift from God that does not allow for reciprocity. Desiring the desire of the other, the classic Hegelian and psychoanalytic formulation, makes constitutive absence and reciprocity the fundamental features of desire. Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Milton attempt to wrest devotional desire away from this mechanism, which they all present as essentially extortive, presenting both God and the devotee as coyly withholding. The problem of desire, and love for that matter, in these lyrics is how to produce, engineer, or maintain an affec-

tive, non-mercenary attachment to a God who is already present, whose love does not need to be wheedled out of him – in short, a desire without a future project or aim.

Whether focusing on reading this verse through the lens of Petrarchism, psychoanalysis, or Reformation history, much modern criticism finds in these poets a desire organized around God's absence and the attendant struggles for compensation or restoration.² Yet with a poetry so intensely concerned with a ceremony that revolves around divine presence, what does it cost to treat its depictions of presence as a questing desire for an inaccessible transcendence, as a fantastical, if nonetheless enabling, illusion? I do not doubt that one can treat devotional poetry's concern with immanence as a symptom of such an abiding lack or absence or a desire for restoration of a lost presence. However, to do so returns desire to a logic of agency and work, the devotional subject struggling to overcome – even if she fails – the distance between herself and God. A model of lack or constitutive absence turns desire for God into a necessary work, instead of a free choice, and thus treats the gift of grace as a matter of recognition and reciprocity. The conceptual apparatus undergirding this model of desire is, of course, Hegel's:

Desire has reserved to itself the pure negating of the object and thereby its unalloyed feeling of self. But that is the reason why this satisfaction is itself only a fleeting one, for it lacks the side of objectivity and permanence. Work, on the other hand, is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words, work forms and shapes the thing. The negative relation to the object becomes its form and something permanent.³

Drawing on Hegel, Susan Stewart describes poetic creation as precisely this sort of work, a reaction against the oblivion and chaos of a primordial night that results in a compensatory product: 'in work that is both the transformation of nature and the means of self-transformation and self-overcoming, the slave as *maker* creates himself in the long path that extends from the night of sense certainty. The slave does not die with the death of his outward form as does the master – the slave leaves the mark of his practices in the world and forms a link with what is universal in human culture.'⁴ Yet she also acknowledges that the lyric poses a challenge to the time and aims of labour and, by implication, the dialectical logic that undergirds it.⁵ What if this oscillation between desire and work, pleasure and permanence, both of which revolve around negation, were not the mechanism of devotional love, choice, or freedom?

What if religious verse were not a struggle to compensate for an absence or overcome an obstacle? What if devotion and love were not work? Finding lack everywhere, even in those poems where desire is imagined as an immanent connection, means insisting that these poets could not have meant what they actually wrote, that evocations of presence are not what they are.⁶ Instead of holding onto the conceptualization of desire that requires such symptomological machinations, I propose that readers consider an alternative account of how desire proceeds in early modern devotional poetry, one that does not assume the mercenary extortions necessary in a lack economy or the teleological aims of a devotion conceived as work: the ‘welding of desire to lack is precisely what gives desire collective and personal ends, goals or intentions – instead of desire taken in the real order of its production, which behaves as a molecular phenomenon devoid of any goal or intention.’⁷ For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, soldering desire to an absent pleasant aim transforms it into a self-exhausting labour, as opposed to a freely moving drive: ‘Work is a motor cause that meets resistances, operates upon the exterior, is consumed and spent in its effect, and must be renewed from one moment to the next. Free action is also a motor cause, but one that has no resistance to overcome, operates only upon the mobile body itself, is not consumed in its effect, and continues from one moment to the next.’⁸ Work, then, is the model of pleasure, struggle, and goals; free action is the model of desire and love. These poets tend to present the presuppositions of work itself as the problem for devotional action, precisely because it requires obstacles, exhaustion, and at least temporary obsolescence for desire: if lack does not exist, it will have to be invented. Modern criticism has tended to find in early modern religious verse a march toward or a quest for God that accords with our expectations of drama and accomplishment. This book argues that for Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Milton, devotional desire and love, even with all the pain, doubt, and anxiety that they might elicit, are not struggle, but rather a loving attention to an immanent divinity. At the very least, this means that these poems are not struggling to overcome a loss, or restore a wholeness.

George Herbert’s ‘Love (III),’ the final poem in ‘The Church’ section of *The Temple*, perhaps most succinctly encapsulates the conflict between these two models of desire, one insisting narcissistically on an irremediable inadequacy and struggle, the other on the desirable gift already available. The poem stages a deceptively quotidian, if not homey, rendition of a eucharistically inflected meal. Its conceit, of course, revolves

Yet Love's reassurance, such as it is, does not endorse the speaker's self-presentation, but rather rebukes this portrait of abject inadequacy. Herbert's response to the givenness of grace is not to distance the communicant from God, or to highlight the inescapable paradox of asserted humility. Rather, the soul's interlocutor chides it for not recognizing its already existing connection to and emanation from Love. Love's response, 'you shall be he,' does not delay a full or worthy identity to an imminent future. Instead, 'shall be' interpellates the speaker in the present, positioning him as a guest at this particular moment, and, in turn, suggests that asserting and speaking, affirming what sort of person one is, is much less important than receiving. In fact, asserting or lamenting one's inadequacy is a self-serving illusion that prevents the devotee from focusing on the activity of receiving love:

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame

Go where it doth deserve.

And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?

My deare, then I will serve.

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:

So I did sit and eat.

(13–18)

The speaker, up to the final line, imagines reception as a matter of reciprocal exchange: I must give a gift in return – 'I will serve' – so as to show my appreciation, gratitude, or worth. Yet this brand of reactive self-demonstration seems precisely what Love cautions against throughout the poem. Love directs the speaker to abandon his initial conception of desire as lack and substitutive transaction for one in which desire is an immanent, intimate connection. Whether the soul learns the lesson that Love teaches, that it does not lack the thing it initially claimed to lack, however, remains an open question at poem's end. The speaker's concluding choice to eat, instead of just tasting the meat as Love asks, may be an indication that he has learned nothing, or at least retains a presumptuousness that would ultimately cripple devotion.¹² The poem then stages the difficulties involved in accepting, using, and desiring God's presence. An immanent divinity is not simply a welcome recompense for a lost unity: absence continues to have its appeal, even after Love explains that it is an inaccurate representation of the world. And of course, it also offers the allure of two very attractive subject positions: a grieved passive-aggressive faux-martyr who hopes to extort love from God and a diligent, committed servant, worker, and slave whose obsession with

struggle cloaks a resentful desire to save himself. The poem then does not seem to have much faith in the ability of right-thinking individuals to choose or desire correctly once they have been shown the light of reason or inspiration: the speaker jumps from abjection to presumption without so much as a hiccup in metre. 'Love (III)' does not simply enjoin its speaker, much less its readers, to choose affective presence instead of absence. It also shows that adjusting a reader's focus away from acquiring God requires a change in disposition, not an addition of knowledge. And in turn, for Herbert, refocusing attention on the manner in which one possesses God entails a refocusing of readers' attention on the practice, instead of the issue, of reading.¹³

This reading of Herbert, of course, echoes recent critical work on the validation of passion and emotion in early modern literature. Critical accounts of humoral physiology and emotion in early modern studies, as well as the general affective turn in literary studies, have certainly been salutary in consigning to the dustbin any simple opposition between passion and reason.¹⁴ Michael Schoenfeldt's account of humoral embodiment, for example, insists that humours are not simply the domain of chaos and disorder, but rather serve as a regulatory mechanism that enables individual agency.¹⁵ Yet even in this model desire works and is regulated by work:

The Renaissance seems to have imagined selves as differentiated not by their desires, which all more or less share, but by their capacity to control these desires. Psychoanalysis and early modern psychology are linked in that both require fastidious attention to the inner promptings of various appetites and urges. But where psychoanalysis tends to locate identity in terms of which objects are desired among the various possibilities, how intensely they are desired, and how these desires have been fashioned by the experiences of early infancy, the Renaissance locates identity in the more or less successful regulation of a series of desires shared by all.¹⁶

Schoenfeldt does not imagine desire and passion as a chaotic mass in need of an extraneous formal imprint, but the model of regulation that his account advances still makes desire both work and the object of work. I do not suggest here that there are no sinful desires that require regulation or control in Renaissance literature. Rather, this study questions the value of early modern studies' pervasive account of desire as an excess in need of measure for a devotion that imagines desire as something more than the circular labour of setting up limits in order to transgress them.

If we are to take seriously the positive account of passion and emotion that early modern studies has bequeathed us, it seems pivotal to abandon a notion of desire that conceives of it as a labour to be overcome or a motor for labour. In this respect, modern scholarship has perhaps (I acknowledge the rampant speculation here) too quickly adopted the ethos and paranoias of its mode of production: the impulse to appear busy, like one is doing real work in a university increasingly under suspicion for idleness.¹⁷ It has also perhaps too hastily assumed that excess and transgression are engines of political engagement and emancipation. Instead of turning to the altered aims or regulatory mechanisms that govern desire, this study argues for a desire without struggle, quests, or work in early modern religious verse, and for the value of this model of desire in the broader context of Renaissance literature. We misunderstand the transformed desire in devotional lyrics if we imagine it as only oriented toward a necessarily deferred aim or as a uniform practice recalcitrant to fundamental change. As Richard Strier notes, citing Petrarch, knowing or understanding virtue, through metaphor or otherwise, is not enough: one must also love it.¹⁸ My claim here is that this love, for virtue or for God, is not simply a well-regulated desire, but a fundamentally different type of desire, one in which we love and care for the immanent without mercenary calculations of reward. Following Aristotle and Strier, if you are the sort of person who needs rules in order to love God, you might be desiring the right thing, but you are not desiring aright.

Reading the Eucharist

In the case of the eucharist, how one desires is a more dominant concern than what one desires. Desire is not organized around its object, the host, or its aim, communion with or incorporation in the body of the church. Moreover, the eucharist is not just one ritual among others, one more liturgical event represented within verse. Rather, as Stephen Greenblatt, Judith Anderson, and Regina Schwartz have maintained, this ceremony and debates about it are central to literary critical conceptions of metaphor and signs, whether representation is even what poetry does with rituals and events.¹⁹ Roman Catholic and Reformed sacramental theologies pose fundamental questions about the process of designation, how exactly a sign indicates or carries meaning. Yet they also explore a communicant's immediate engagement with a sign or a sacrament. Thus, Zwinglian and Cranmerian memorialism solves the problem of reference by insisting that, in the words of institution, 'is'

means ‘signifies.’²⁰ Signification, though, does not solve the problem of reception and reading or explain the immanent encounter with this designating sign. As a result, Cranmer insists on the commonality of a signifying procedure, maintaining that because it happens every day, surely we understand it: this process amounts to ‘calling a thing that signifieth, by the name of the thing which is signified thereby: which is no rare nor strange thing, but an usual manner and phrase in common speech.’²¹ Other Roman Catholic and Reformed formulations, as well as those of later English divines, are not so sanguine about the clarity and simplicity of this common procedure. Ultimately, the eucharist and its signs do not just enact a debate about the nature of reference, but also pose the more foundational question of how one receives a sign and even how a sign can be desirable in its own right. The sacrament is pivotal for reading this verse precisely because it serves as a site for examining how one goes about receiving divinity, not just through the senses, but also through words.

In the Thomist tradition, even if a communicant desires the ultimate aim of the eucharist, participation in God and the church, the means already contain this end: thus, the telescoping, even instantaneously performative power of *ex opere operato* extends to the recipient of the grace really present in the elements. Aquinas begins in a manner similar to Cranmer, by describing the sacrament as a metaphor, a means of conveying knowledge to humans through something they already know: bread and wine. But it also turns out that the sign itself has sanctifying power, which is what distinguishes it from a run-of-the mill signifier:

Signs are given to men. Now it is characteristic of men that they achieve an awareness of things which they do not know through things which they do know. Hence the term ‘sacrament’ is properly applied to that which is a sign of some sacred reality pertaining to men; or – to define the special sense in which the term ‘sacrament’ is being used in our present discussion of the sacraments – it is applied to that which is a sign of a sacred reality inasmuch as it has the property of sanctifying men.²²

As even this classical Catholic formulation of the sacrament indicates, the eucharist has never simply been about the nature of reference or the collapse of signifier into signified, word into thing.²³ Rather, Aquinas’s account reveals an insistent concern with the desire that attends this special sort of sign, or what it means to desire such a sign and what its effects are:

Of itself this sacrament has grace-giving virtue, nor does anyone have grace before receiving it except from the longing for it, whether his own, as with an adult, or the Church's, as with babies, as has been stated. Accordingly it is from the effectiveness of its power that even by desiring it a person obtains grace whereby he is spiritually alive. Still it is true that when the sacrament itself is really received grace is increased and the life of the spirit perfected.²⁴

Although Aquinas locates the power of the sacrament in its own virtues, he also insists that the sheer desire for it produces a type of grace, the grace 'whereby he is spiritually alive.' This is not 'really received grace,' but it remains a type of grace nonetheless. This formulation amounts to the suggestion that the sign itself elicits desire and that this desire itself is a devotional and salvational act. Aquinas, then, prompts the primary critical question that early modern devotional poetry poses: not how signifier and signified relate, but how one desires and receives a sign with its own inherent value.

The Calvinist sacrament offers a similarly desirable independent sign, one that is perhaps even more autonomous than the Real Presence effected in a transubstantiated host. In a Reformed context, where the Lord's Supper is a seal of grace, not its efficient cause, the object of desire is the virtualist host, which does not confer grace, but acts as a full symbol or seal of grace.²⁵ One certainly might still desire the same grace and communion that serve as ostensible aims, but in Protestant accounts, these are causally unmoored from the Lord's Supper itself. The *Institutes* insist that sacramental signification, while not conjuring bodily presence, does entail a special fullness for the symbols involved, a fullness that outflanks charges of *mere* signification:

The rule which the pious ought always to observe is, whenever they see the symbols instituted by the Lord, to think and feel surely persuaded that the truth of the thing signified is also present. For why does the Lord put the symbol of his body into your hands, but just to assure you that you truly partake of him? If this is true let us feel as much assured that the visible sign is given us in seal of an invisible gift as that his body itself is given to us. (4.17.10, 564)

Calvin consistently attempts to debunk the accusation of mere signification by implying not only that God connects a signified reality to sacramental signs, but also, like Cranmer, that even quotidian signs legitimately adopt the names of absent things (4.17.21, 574). As with

Aquinas, though, his account of the sacrament's action focuses on the affective disposition within reception at the centre of the ritual event, not just the connection between signs and their designations: we are not just persuaded, but *feel surely* persuaded.

A similar receptionist focus appears in accounts of the sacrament from English divines with wildly divergent confessional commitments. One need only turn to the Elizabethan church's Thirty-Nine Articles to recognize this preoccupation in English theology:

The supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another; but rather it is a sacrament of our redemption by Christ's death: *insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith, receive the same, the bread which we break is a partaking of the body of Christ; and likewise the cup of blessing is a partaking of the blood of Christ . . . The body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the body of Christ is received and eaten in the supper is faith.*²⁶

In this formulation, the actual, real partaking of the body depends on the manner – rightly, worthily, and faithfully – in which a communicant receives the sacrament, not the ontological status of the objective elements themselves. William Perkins offers a similar account of the importance of reception for any notion of Real Presence:

. . . when God gives Christ with his benefits and man for his part receives the same as they are given, there riseth that union which is between every good receiver and Christ himself: which union is not forged, but a real, true and near conjunction, nearer than which none is or can be, because it is made by a solemn giving and receiving that passeth between God and man, as also by the bond of one and the same Spirit. To come then to the point, considering there is a real union, and consequently a real communion between us and Christ as I have proved, *there must needs be such a kind of presence wherein Christ is truly and really present to the heart of him that receives the sacrament in faith.* And thus far do we consent with the Romish Church touching real presence.²⁷

Perkins's insistence on a 'true and near conjunction' between human and divine presents the sacrament as an immanent affinity and, thus, gives the lie to any characterization of the Reformed sacrament as a bare sign governed by lack or absence. Instead, these formulations introduce

affective experience and reception not as the solution to debates about Real Presence, but rather as the site where they play out.

But an emphasis on sacramental reception is not confined to revolutionary, or even conforming Puritans. Indeed, conservative and moderate 'Anglicans' also adopt and adapt this position. Richard Hooker, in language strikingly similar to Perkins's, uses reception to translate transubstantiation into a description of what happens to communicants, not bread or wine:

. . . to us they [the consecrated elements] are thereby made such instrumentes as mysticallie yeat trulie, invisible yeat reallie worke our communion or fellowship with the person of Jesus Christ as well in that he is man as God, our participation also in the fruit of grace and efficacie of his bodie and blood, whereupon there ensueth a kind of transubstantiation in us, a true change both of soule and bodie.²⁸

Lancelot Andrewes's notoriously ambiguous doctrinal stance on the eucharist also emphasizes reception.²⁹ He chiastically inverts this sacramental operation as well, insisting that the sacrament also effects a receiving of the communicant into the church:

For this is indeed the true receiving, when one is received to the table, to eat and drink, to take his repast there; yea *ad accipiendum in Quo acceptus est*, to take, and to take into him 'that body, by the oblation whereof we are all sanctified,' and that blood 'in which we have all remission of sins.' In that ended they, in this let us end. And this accepting we desire of God; and desiring it in an acceptable time, He will hear us.³⁰

The ubiquity of these concerns about proper taking and receiving indicates that receptionism is not the solution to the problem of intractable doctrinal debates about eucharistic presence, but the problem itself. And it is this focus on practices of reception, what it is one does in receiving presence, not just its results or aims, that makes the sacrament a pivotal site for understanding not just meaning and signification, but the activity of reading itself.

The basic question of how to desire a full sign or symbol issues in the literary critical problem of how one might desire a sign for its own sake. Both Roman Catholic and Reformed theology emphasize not the broader telos of communion or the overcoming of a lack via goal-oriented work, but rather the receptive activity that one performs on or with this

specific sort of sign. These theological accounts insist that readers grapple with a given real presence, of whatever stripe, instead of subsuming it within a purposive logic. Although it is beyond the scope of this project, these poets' – even Crashaw's – rejection of a logic of work can be seen as a response to the general Reformation objection to a soteriology of works. For these poets at least, once works become suspicious, the notion of struggle too comes under suspicion as a way to conceive of action. Instead of affirming a faith that would replace works, these lyrics rearticulate activity as a matter of love. They solve the problem of what to do if faith is all that is necessary for salvation by abrogating activity construed as purposive struggle in favour of a free activity motivated by love, without extraneous aims.³¹ Faith might well happen in rituals, individuals, and even churches, but poetry is the site of love and activity. This poetic rejection of work garners support from the fact that the sacrament is already, in Aquinas and Calvin, a question of immanent desire and not merely a symptom of a primordial – or historical – loss.³² Moreover, even the theological underpinnings of this communion ritual foreground the problem of desiring signs and seals in their own right, not as instrumental causes of some more precious spiritual reality or state. And it is for this reason that poetic attention to the eucharist also entails, if not transforms into, an abiding concern with reading as an activity independent of its potential goals, including interpretation. The sign and one's encounter with it are more complicated than a matter of reference or commonsensical communication precisely because one also desires the signifier itself, not its ultimate signified or object.³³ The concern with reception that informs theological accounts of the eucharist from Aquinas to Andrewes reveals sacramental theology's recurrent preoccupation not just with metaphor, but with the appropriate dynamics of active reception: how to receive presence in a manner that is active but not presumptuous, dismissive, or mercenary. It is this concern that ultimately turns the sacrament into a pivotal model for devotional reading.³⁴

Even criticism at odds over the confessional allegiances of these poets has consistently registered their concerns with the nature of presence. For example, Barbara Lewalski and Louis Martz both insist on the power of signs to convey and embody a divine immanence.³⁵ Yet a critical focus on whether or not Donne is a Calvinist turns religious desire into a matter of confessional identity and, moreover, conspires to occlude the uniform receptive activities that occur in devotion. In other words, a thesis about the beliefs that one holds ignores the activities that occupy early modern devotional verse, including the activity of 'holding' a belief. It

is not that there are no differences between Catholic and Protestant devotion, of course, but rather that the focus on determining a given poet's allegiances reduces poetry – and religious ceremonies and events themselves for that matter – to nothing more than superfluous representations of these convictions. In addition, confessional allegiance as an analytical tool turns choice into a selection between competing belief options. As Molly Murray notes, there is something reassuring about such a dichotomous choice, both for early modern converts and modern critics: it reassures us that we know what Protestantism or Catholicism is, that it is marked by an internal homology, not a chaotic set of differences. Murray, though, finds the language of conversion in poetry and polemic to be so strikingly similar that it tends to present indistinguishable processes: only the end result – I'm a Protestant; I'm a Catholic – distinguishes these activities.³⁶ A critical focus on confessional identity, then, treats conversion as a uniform labour differentiated *ex post facto* and harbours one very loaded assumption about the nature of historical change: that which is new is necessarily a negation, rejection, or refutation of the old or, to put it in explicitly Hegelian terms, the blossom is the refutation of the bud.³⁷ The problem, of course, with this dialectical model is that it defines one's new confessional identity, as it must, via opposition: the old me has been rejected and lost, but also preserved in a new distinguishing resolution. These poems do not respond to this problem simply by offering a more positive account of what one desires, as if listing the propositions in which one believes escapes this particular identitarian trap: confessional allegiance might be a way to describe one's preparation for an encounter with the divine, or the convictions that issue from such an encounter, but it remains a decidedly blunt tool for describing or enacting a desirous response to immanent divinity and the acts of conversion and devotion entailed thereby. These poems and, as a consequence, this study, focus less on the devotee's transformation into a new subject, than they do the evasion, however provisional, of this entire interpellating structure: these lyrics explore the activity of desire and love as such, instead of assuming in advance their goals and origins.

A focus on confessional allegiances then buttresses the very concerns with identity that this verse seems at pains to avoid: not because of a broad toleration or rising secularism, but rather because these lyrics do not imagine religion as a matter of belief or conviction, but rather as a manner of living and as a loving action. Of course, labelling Donne or Herbert a Calvinist is only useful if we know what Calvinism means, but

more is at stake than the relative finality of such definitions. Rather, at stake is the basic logic of how devotion and love proceed, whether they fit within the structuring poles of subject and object or, instead, treat action and relation as dispositions observable in their own right. In other words, should we even conceive of reading as an action that a subject performs on an object? As Cummings contends, critical discussions of confessional allegiances mistake the level at which devotion plays out in poetry:

Most accounts of religious writing are founded on an unacknowledged conceptual separation of the surface of discourse from the beliefs that motivate them. Religion comes first, writing follows after. This goes hand in hand with the attempted identification of a writer's beliefs in terms of a doctrinal position or party . . . It is at the surface of discourse that the nexus of grammar and grace is found. It is here that the anxieties and tensions of early modern religion are revealed.³⁸

Knowing whether a given poem is Catholic or Protestant does not really explain the sort of desire, love, or reading that its words and actions enjoin, precisely because this model of action presupposes that what is really important is what one believes, not what one does. Poems, according to this reading, are representations of belief, not active expressions of devotion. The same degradation holds for the ritual itself: a model of religiosity that centres on belief turns the ceremony itself into an unnecessary representation of the belief and conviction that undergirds it. Somewhat paradoxically, it is the logic of belief and confessional identity that renders Catholic and Protestant positions indistinguishable, precisely because everything then flows from and back to the same source: a subject's conviction.

At one level, this conflict between ends and actions is a reprise of a broader critical debate about the nature of lyric, whether it is characterized by immediacy and presence or a fictionalized speaker and absence. Heather Dubrow traces this conflict to the early modern rhetorical origins of the concept of immediacy: 'Those roots are, however, somewhat tangled by the verbal and conceptual similarities between the concepts of *enargia*, which can roughly be translated as a vividness that makes it possible to see in the mind's eye, and *energia*, which suggests activity and energy.'³⁹ The poems under consideration in this study, though, tend either to focus on *energia* or conflate these two lyric phenomena, insisting that the distance between a representation and its object is actually

populated by a positive content and connection: in an inversion of the conventional slogan, representation is always first presentation. In this sense, these poems often act like autonomous relations or activities, capable of existence and analysis without the terms that purportedly book-end them: author and reader, intention and meaning. Poems, in this light, do not reestablish a lost connection or performatively instantiate a new state of affairs. Instead, they exist in a world in which, in Deleuze and Guattari's parlance, relation is primary, in which it is possible to examine relations independent of the terms that circumscribe them and to escape the cycle of recognition and reciprocity that allows us to treat the distance between subject and object as an empty gulf and the site of a uniform work.⁴⁰ It is for this reason that reading is not a transaction or an exchange, either imagined as rationalist value optimization or a circular reciprocity: such a transactional account, like that advanced by Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, necessarily destines the thing that one reads to obsolescence.⁴¹ It is not just that the subject is troubled or fragmented or constituted performatively, but that if one is focused on terms – whether they be origins, ends, or subjects – one is not focused on the activity of reading and relation, only its purportedly instrumental aims. Or to modify Lee Morrissey's terms, reading becomes so much a question of ends that there is no need to read.⁴² A poem then is not a gift that calls for reciprocal response, the circulation of social energy or the potlatch: such reciprocity always secretes the mercenary aim of levelling accounts. Instead, the poem becomes an exercise in reception, what it means to receive and take without immediately treating this reception as a debt to be repaid – i.e., as a future labour. It is in this sense that the devotional poem and the sacrament of the altar share a logic: both act as present gifts whose issue is less important than the attentive disposition entailed in an encounter with them.⁴³ The activity of reading the poem does not produce or unearth a proposition – although interpretation certainly does – but turns readers into attentive and loving actors and receivers, if only for a moment. Of course, there are innumerable ways that a reader might evade this activity, short-circuiting it with a rush to meaning or busy inattention or an insistence that the real or spiritual realm is bigger than language. A poem cannot force people to agree to these propositions or act in an attentive manner. It can, however, show how all of these familiar practices are not really reading: aims and goals might be endlessly useful, but they leave blank and empty the in-between space, the positive distance that reading purportedly bridges.⁴⁴ This poetry then is a positive, autonomous relation insofar as it refuses to treat

this space as a black hole or black box, defined only by its poles. In short, it tries to imagine divine love and desire – God’s love for us and our love for him – as having a positive content, something other than a yearning for the opposite of absence.

Religious poetry then attempts to focus readerly attention not on the one who is speaking, but the speaking itself. In this respect, these poems mirror Jonathan Culler’s account of a lyric that resists narrativization in order to focus on an immanent present:

. . . it is deadly for poetry to try to compete with narrative – by promoting lyrics as representations of the experience of subjects – on a terrain where narrative has obvious advantages. If narrative is about what happens next, lyric is about what happens now – in the reader’s engagement with each line – and teachers and scholars should celebrate its singularity, its difference from narrative.⁴⁵

Infuriating as it may be, attending to the present poem, engaging each line, does not issue in a generalized reading strategy, or at least not a strategy organized as a method. ‘Pay attention’ does not really distinguish one critical approach from another: after all, no one enjoins ‘do not pay attention.’ Yet as Blanchot notes, there is a general reading, a general attention that is the great threat to the singular event that is an encounter with a poem: ‘What most threatens reading is this: the reader’s reality, his personality, his immodesty, his stubborn insistence upon remaining himself in the face of what he reads – a man who knows in general how to read.’⁴⁶ The problem that an individual devotional poem or an immanent sacrament poses is always how to perform an action in such a way that it does not become a general principle, a rule that replaces the act itself. It turns out that evading an abstract reading, resisting the urge to turn reading into a general skill, is much more difficult than we might originally have imagined.

Even for a purportedly secular modernity, the eucharist matters as a model for reading a given thing, without reference to its broader aim or purpose, those general goals that shape disparate acts into a methodical procedure.⁴⁷ I do not maintain that all reading is really religious, or that all literary criticism is fundamentally pious, but rather that the attention to action, presence, and relation that these poems offer is an apt description for what literature does: it disposes us to love something for its own sake without hope of return or reward. Even if this ends up as the pedagogical aim of these poems, it is an aim of a very specific sort: not a telos

organizing a cascading series of causes, with attendant objectives, but rather an effect or issue structured as a free action or desire, instead of work; not Kant's purposiveness without purpose, but rather a poem with effects that are not organized according to a principle of developmental stages, first and final causes, or learning objectives. Love, in other words, is not just any old objective, like critical thinking. Learning to receive, to treat love as receptive attention alters a teleological understanding of how pedagogy can proceed, and what it even means to have an aim or purpose. This verse asks us to focus on effects and affects and not aims; it offers a desire and a reading organized around love, not struggle. Loving God, it turns out, is hard precisely because it does not promise the reassuring logic of accomplishment and failure that attends any and all accounts of desire and reading that characterize them as work.

Chapter 1 explores how Herbert's verse uses taste, instead of eating, as a means of meditating on the appropriate means of taking, if not possessing God. In fact, in *The Temple*, this basic concern with the logic of taking, a taking that does not diminish the taken, characterizes desire as well: pleasure and delight, unlike desire and love, require that the world be organized as a quest and that something be taken away from a divine gift. Herbert's much ballyhooed plainness then becomes a similar lesson in how to take poetry, the possession without subtraction or extraction that taking and receiving actually entails. *The Temple* ultimately presents reading, and tasting, as a free activity that does not characterize its freedom as a choice between options, as a selection among possible objects or ends, much less a natural and necessary drive toward incorporation or restoration.

Chapter 2 argues that Crashaw's poetry uses synaesthesia and the indistinguishability of subjects and objects to promote a devotional experience that is not governed by the solidity of substance, but rather by careful attention to the multiple immanent relations between God and devotees. According to a unidirectional epistemological model of metaphor, in which figures employ the familiar in order to transmit the intelligible, sensible impressions are more immediately knowable and thus can convey difficult intellectual concepts. Crashaw's verse, on the contrary, does not present sense as more intimate or accessible than thought or spirit and, instead, conflates sense, figure, and idea into a metonymic sacramental worldview. In the end, Crashaw's verse enjoins a reading activity that is openly iconophilic, if not idolatrous, and maintains that it is actually the distinction between signifier and signified, word and thing, that enables a dangerous idolatry.

These poets' conceptions of sacramental experience ultimately shape the model of reading propounded and advanced in their devotional verse. For Donne and Milton, reading is not so much affected by a primary sacramental event as it actually is that primary event. Whereas Herbert and Crashaw embrace the Lord's Supper as a liturgical ceremony and experience, Donne always considers it first and foremost a reading experience. Chapter 3 then maintains that Donne's famed rejection of assurance in the Holy Sonnets stands as a primary example not of the inconsolable anxiety that attends desperate devotees, but rather of the value of anxiety itself. His model of sacramental reading practice asks us to read anxiously and desperately, not because we are driven to overcome anxiety, but rather because these are the appropriate devotional responses to the divine. The effect of this reading strategy is a transformation of the basic character of fear: it can no longer be simply opposed to love as a reactive passion. This chapter concludes by arguing that Donne's focus on grammatical and syntactical operators in the Divine Poems issues in a devotion concerned with the concept of relation itself: what it means to resemble, assimilate, or associate with some other entity.

Chapter 4 contends that it is the sacramental immanence – not the apocalyptic imminence – of the end that serves as the primary devotional stimulant in Milton's poetry. His frequent use of prolepsis asks that we desire what has already happened in the present and embrace a monist devotional universe in which the problem of a deferred or absent consummation never even occurs. Thus, sacramental presence functions in Milton's verse in a manner similar to its role in Herbert's: it allows for a conceptual and devotional exploration of an activity that does not have an external or ulterior purpose. Reading, then, can no longer seek to find something new in a poem or add something new to it. Despite the apparent redundancy attached to such a model of reading, this chapter shows how reading nonetheless remains a valuable activity in Milton's verse insofar as it trains readers, perhaps against their will, to be virtuous. *Paradise Regained* even goes so far as to maintain that the activity of reading is itself the activity of love.

The conclusion meditates on the broader implications of the reading practices outlined and demanded by a poetry that takes Real Presence seriously. It sketches the value, for both literary criticism and pedagogy, of treating poetry as an entity or event without the aim of meaning. The conclusion also contends that there are certain benefits, especially for modern readers, to be derived from a reading practice separated from an interpretive goal and the logic of struggle and work, among them the

rejection of mercenary consumerist and informatic approaches to literature. For literary criticism, such a model offers the possibility of focusing on the act of reading literature, and not the epistemological truths of other disciplines, as the ground for future critical study. Obviously, Milton, Donne, Herbert, and Crashaw do not maintain that reading is a useless or pointless endeavour. However, their depictions of reading practice do provide a welcome corrective to modern, popular understandings of reading as a means to an end, whether that end be pleasure, understanding, education, distraction, or salvation.