

GOD'S MOTHER, EVE'S ADVOCATE by Tina Beattie,

Continuum, London 2002. Pp. xii + 244

EVE'S PILGRIMAGE: A WOMAN'S QUEST FOR THE CITY OF GOD by Tina Beattie, *Continuum*, London 2002. Pp. xi + 224, £9.99 pbk.

These two books by Tina Beattie, which were prepared for different purposes and audiences, are linked by a common concern to discover, as she puts it, 'How can one be a Catholic and a feminist . . . without tearing oneself apart in the process' (EP, 7). On the one hand is 'the sacramental and social vision of Catholicism' that attracts her, and on the other is the feminist critique of the 'theological position of women' that persuades her to be concerned about the 'impoverishment' of this tradition. Finding herself caught in the middle of these oppositional stances and committed to both, she seeks a mediation, and these books are illustrations both of the method and the result of this reconciling effort.

As for the method – the first book, her doctoral dissertation previously published in the CCSRG Monograph Series of the University of Bristol, is an analysis of the symbolism of sexual difference that runs through the texts of the Christian tradition and that defines gender identity in the life of the Church. The analysis is predicated on the feminist conviction that the prevailing symbolic narrative in general, and Marian symbolism in particular, have been shaped by patriarchal ideologies that privilege the male body. Beattie seeks both to demonstrate this thesis with selected examples from the tradition, and at the same time to suggest that the potential for other interpretations of these symbols can be liberated by attending to the generative and redemptive possibilities of the female body. Her primary guide in this project is Luce Irigaray, whose various playful and irreverent 'insinuations' into dominant philosophical discourses attempt to destabilise their authority and undermine their persuasive power. Such Beattie seeks similarly to do within the accounts of Mary and Eve, finding the spaces within orthodox Christian thought that could be feminist-friendly and that, through creative reinterpretation, might become points of mediation.

As for the result – the second of these books is a woman's journey through Rome in the company of Eve, giving a more popularly accessible illustration of the thesis that is argued in the first. Combining insights from a variety of disciplines, Beattie sets out on a pilgrimage of reinterpretation through a city rich with symbolism, inviting the reader to accompany her as she visits a particular place in each chapter. There is a reflection on creation in the Sistine Chapel, on the fall at the Colosseum, on baptism at the Pantheon, and so on, until the final reflection on resurrection at the Paul VI Concert Hall. She understands the city to be 'a work of redemption, wherein we

transform the garden of creation into the history and culture of our human becoming' (EP, xi). So these thoughts on the western cultural inheritance are intended to disclose within such a city the grounds for Christian hope of a new heaven and a new earth, as well as the role of women's insights and of female bodies in this second coming. That they culminate with a celebration of women's music and dance inside a concert hall is in keeping with the cultural constructionism of her whole project.

Two philosophical problems beset her effort in these books, in consequence of which they cannot carry the theological weight and significance she hopes for. Neither of these is *her* problem, but both are features of the problematic condition of contemporary thought in which feminisms have arisen and Christian faith has been gasping for air. If the first problem concerns the entire collapse of the cosmology within which sexual difference has traditionally been conceived, it is well illustrated by the necessity felt today in this disoriented emptiness for positing the maternal body as the site of liberation and of redemption. Much depends on this, for 'The symbolic positioning of the mother is the linchpin for both the perpetuation and the destruction of patriarchal values' (GM, 108). I say 'positing', because Beattie does not produce an argument about the nature of the cosmos as such, but shares the postmodern conviction that 'positions' in 'nature' are expressions of will to power and thus malleable to human determination. As patriarchal power has produced the symbolic narrative handed down in Christianity, and still today attempts to enforce this privilege through what Beattie calls 'neo-orthodox' reinstatements of sexual difference, so a counter-weight is required to swing things in another direction. And this, her books set out to produce. Yet without any consideration of the question of truth in these matters, can this yield anything but another act of power – in this case, a moral requirement to think in a certain way and with a certain intensity of feeling, in order that humanity may be saved for what some may consider a better future?

Beattie's call for re-imagining bodies, for re-constructing our feelings, for re-weaving a vision of life, and for re-configuring Christian symbols – all of these phrases that recur in the two books – points to the necessity for a willed determination to make things better at least so far as we can see from here, commonly called re-valuation. And this is the second problematic feature of thinking in our time. For such language not only discloses the form of nihilism that Nietzsche knew to be consequent upon the death of God, but also reveals its essence to be an overturned Platonism from which multiple and endless semblances of truth are to be generated. That feminists seek to ground an overcoming of this nihilism in an interpretation of the female body, where all of this diversity can be held and nurtured and valued and 'redeemed' – and this means by a kind of virtual essentialism

of woman – an ontology that is not one, as Irigaray might have it – is yet to live out the very imperative and pretence of power that the situation of nihilism itself imposes. In what sense then has it been broken open?

The theological responsibilities here are not trivial, nor will they surprise those who have read *Fides et ratio*. For the collapse of philosophy into competing narratives and chosen standpoints is a sign of the failure of faith to serve the truth of the Paschal Mystery. This cannot be undertaken by flicking a switch as though we could make this mystery appear exactly as we would like it to be. So Beattie's hope that we can simply look at the Eucharist in another way, no longer as a blood sacrifice that 'performs the function of preserving patrilineal structures in the Catholic Church', but rather as a 'celebration of the earth's fecundity' (GM, 196–8), which would reinstate the value of woman's place in Christian symbolism – this hope makes nothing happen. And it is precisely into this nothing that faith must struggle to learn how to be witness to truth all over again.

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