

Introduction

*Our contemporary fascination with presence . . . is based on a longing for presence that in the contemporary context can only be satisfied in conditions of extreme temporal fragmentation.*¹

THINKING “SACRAMENT”

This book is an interdisciplinary inquiry into the nature of sacrament and into the relationship between the Eucharist—the ritual partaking of the body and blood of Christ in the symbols of bread and wine—as the sacrament *par excellence*, and sacramental themes or “traces” of sacramentality that appear in contemporary fictional narratives. In a “post-Christian” (or at the very least “post-ecclesial”) age characterized by waning participation in traditional Christian practices,² a surprising persistence and relevance of sacramental themes and eucharistic allusions may be observed within contemporary literature and the creative arts more broadly. One wonders, then—apart from the legitimizing role of the Church in her theology and liturgy—from whence the Eucharist, or even a more vague concept of “sacramentality,” derives any meaning. In seeking to understand why the sacramental/eucharistic continues to capture the contemporary imagination, this project pursues several questions: What is a sacrament? Why has Christian theology found sacrament to be such a contentious concept? How has the notion of sacrament, most fully realized in the celebration of the Eucharist, both defined and been defined by the Church? How is sacrament related to language and the body? How is the notion of a sacramental or eucharistic “real presence” figured within contemporary postmodern narratives and practices? And what new insights into traditional Christian sacramental

1. Gumbrecht, *Production*, 20.

2. See, e.g., Bruce, *God is Dead*; Brown, *Christian Britain*; Davie, *Religion in Britain*.

and liturgical practice might contemporary literature and the arts provide, and what impact might this in turn have on Christian faith and practice?

While they have, at least since the Enlightenment, enjoyed a certain freedom from the liturgical and theological constraints of the Church, throughout history the creative arts have maintained a complicated relationship to Christianity, and Christian worship in particular. The arts have of course been employed in Christian worship as supplemental or illustrative tools—as, so to speak, a “handmaiden” to the aims of theology and liturgy—but the arts also offer a unique perspective on the scandalous and subversive implications of the Christian faith; thus we might call the relationship between the arts and Christian ritual a “deconstructive” relationship. The arts seem to understand and wrestle with the profanity inherent to the sacred in a way that theology is rarely, if ever, capable of. This essay’s central thesis is that literature and the arts are able to “think through” the deconstructive core of the Eucharist in ways that theology undertakes only at its own peril. That is to say, theology takes seriously this deconstruction—which we will develop according to the theme of *scandal*³ (Gk. *skandalon*, literally “stumbling block”)—only by risking the stability of the eucharistic community itself: the Church, under the headship of the Christ represented in the eucharistic celebration, which may be understood as the Church’s “constitutive action.” Yet the Eucharist itself, which simultaneously (de)stabilizes and (con)foundations the Church and her theology, demands, and indeed enacts, this risk. In other words, on one level, the Eucharist “guarantees” God’s grace⁴ and Christ’s presence to the Church, while simultaneously

3. While we have developed this heuristic to meet the demands of this project, several other thinkers deserve credit for providing the useful theme of scandal/*skandalon*: Prof. David Jasper first pointed out that the Pauline concept “stumbling block” was the Gk. term *skandalon*, and he has utilized the theme of scandal in his recent study *The Sacred Body*, e.g., “the scandal of the crucified” (33). Nathan Mitchell points in this direction, e.g., “On the cross, God subverts all we know of “God.” Such a searing scandal cannot be grasped *conceptually*” (*Meeting Mystery*, 37). See also Westhelle, *Scandalous God*. In all these examples, as in St. Paul’s usage, the *skandalon* is the crucified Christ. The only precedent we know of for relating sacrament directly to *skandalon* in the Pauline sense is Louis-Marie Chauvet’s *Symbol and Sacrament*, which is foundational to this thesis in many ways, e.g., “The Sacramental Stumbling Block” (153–54), “For this true scandal is that God . . . continues to raise up for himself a body in the world” (187), “there is something particularly scandalous about the Eucharistic presence of Christ” (383 and *passim*). Finally, while we will disagree with him on certain points, we must cite the influence of Graham Ward’s discussion of “the ontological scandal” of the eucharistic “is” (“this is my body”) in relation to Christ’s “displaced body” and the “broken bodies of postmodernity” in chapters 3–4 of *Cities* (81–116).

4. Following Chauvet, *grace* from the standpoint of Christian sacramentality implies *graciousness* as well as *gratuitousness*, i.e., that which is beyond economy and utility; see *Symbol and Sacrament*, 108–9.

problematizing and unsettling *every* foundation. The effort to “found” the Church upon Christ’s eucharistic presence, then, results in the “foundering” of the Church itself; for Christ’s body—both historical and eucharistic—refuses to be “nailed down.”⁵

This book proposes to undertake an interpretation of the Church’s eucharistic practice as inherently and irreducibly *scandalous*, as demonstrated in the literary and artistic explorations to which we will attend; and then to apply the implications of this scandal to the liturgical and sacramental practices of the Church today, as well as to the secular cultural context that the Church inhabits. This will require close readings of a variety of texts: liturgical, theological, and historical sources, as well literary and artistic texts which illuminate the questions at hand. What will emerge is a reimagining of the Eucharist as participation in this *skandalon*, and of the eucharistic community as an assembly (*ecclesia*), a gathering, which is *con-voked*, called together, by this scandal, even as it is torn asunder by it. In this sense, the Church (or any assembly which might be described as eucharistic) is a community founded upon a scandal, and it is this scandal which necessarily un-founds and up-roots this community. A community that is properly called eucharistic is not one which *possesses* the Eucharist, but one which is *possessed by* the Eucharist. This possession *by* the Eucharist is a *dis*-possession of every possession, a risk that can never be fully avoided, the same risk God ultimately undertook in the incarnation of Christ: the risk of death, that is, the absolute loss of self.

Even prior to the cross, the central symbol of the eucharistic community is the broken body of the Crucified One. It is this symbol of brokenness that unites the Church, and has done so throughout the ages. The loss of the centrality of this symbol is nothing less than the loss of the Church-as-Church. But we can understand this only by understanding the Church as a community that interprets death—a particular death—as its very *life* and reason for being. The Church, then, has an entirely different perspective than the world, one that understands death-as-presence (and correspondingly, resurrection-as-absence), as we shall see in our examination of biblical sources. This is the scandal of the Eucharist today, a scandal that has typically been domesticated by the Church, but which, we argue, must be continually sought and upheld as essential to the very be(com)ing of the Church as the Body-of-Christ broken for the life of the world.

5. See Moore, *God’s Gym*, 37–39.

THE EUCHARIST IN THEOLOGY AND LITERATURE

The problem with the Eucharist has always been primarily a problem of interpretation; indeed, we might propose that the attempt to interpret the Eucharist is an exercise in futility from the outset. The Reformation debates about how the Eucharist “works”—how Christ’s real presence is manifest in the present, whether according to notions of transubstantiation, consubstantiation, commemoration, or otherwise—simply brought to a climax the Church’s ongoing attempt to understand and articulate the meaning of Christ’s declaration “this [bread] is my body . . . this [cup] is my blood” (Mark 14:22–24), and what, if any, direct relationship those identifications have to the Church’s *leitourgia*.

Long before they were inscribed in the writings that would comprise the New Testament, Jesus’ words and actions at the Last Supper were repeated by those followers who believed in his bodily resurrection from the dead. From their first repetition began a ritual tradition and with it the project of interpreting these words and actions. David Power is clear on this point: “tradition is first and foremost the transmission of life in Christ and the Spirit, down through time and across cultures. This has its doctrinal, theological . . . devotional, and sacramental expressions. As far as these are concerned, the action of tradition involves a constant process of interpretation.”⁶ So we ask, what did Jesus mean by “this is my body . . . this is my blood”? By “do this” (*touto poieite*)? By “remembrance” (*anamnēsin*)? What did Jesus mean for them, and us, to “do,” and what did he mean for us to understand by it?

These are significant and in some ways irresolvable questions; and yet, in an important sense, *understanding* is not the point of the Eucharist at all. Christ does not instruct his followers to *comprehend* or *explain* or *interpret* the mystical action, but rather simply to *do* it. Theology, however, has never quite been able to cope with such an apophatic posture toward the mystery. David Jasper puts it thus:

In this lack of a beyond, utterly immanent yet wholly transcendent, lies the sacramental heart of the insistent “real presence” of the Eucharist in which, even from the time of St. Paul, the followers of Christ took the intolerable flesh into their own bodies in the Eucharist even as they were consumed by it. Yet the oblivion of theology itself has tended to obliterate this scandal,

6. Power, *Sacrament*, 39. For a more detailed account of Power’s hermeneutical approach to sacraments as “language” (drawing upon the work of David Tracy), see 48–49 of the same work.

the scandal of the crucified, unwatchable body, the body in hell,
that yet we take into ourselves.⁷

Indeed, theo-*logy's* task is necessarily iterative; it is to reason or speak a word (*logos*) about God (*theos*). Theology, it would seem, is genetically predisposed to resist silence and absence. And while theology has always left a little room for the apophatic way of the *via negativa*, its dominant mode is to speak and reason endlessly about those divine matters that are its concern.

Literature, on the other hand, and the arts more broadly, is able to cope with silence and absence, even when attempting to inscribe it into its own narrative. Where theologians have often sought to overcome or explain away the divine *mystērion*, the work of artists and writers have been able to sustain the mystery, albeit in obscured, inverted, subverted, perverted, and otherwise scandalous and scandalizing ways.⁸ Theology seeks to define, in the service of ecclesiastical doctrine, and to construct speculative systems that “make sense” of the complex interrelationship between God, humankind, creation, sin, Scripture, and so on; such delineation tends to limit the scope of its subject matter. Art (literary or otherwise), on the other hand, seeks to “make sense” (i.e., create meaning) as well, not by delineating but by *transgressing* boundaries, by *de-limiting* in a less or even un-systematic mode. Art does not serve doctrine or dogma, or else it ceases to be art, and instead becomes propaganda; its “narratives,” such as they may be called, do not seek to construct intellectual systems but to deconstruct rigid patterns of thought and action so as to open new pathways and possibilities for human thinking and being.

In this sense, literature and the arts pick up where theology leaves off. While this is an “interdisciplinary” study, one cannot act as theologian and literary critic in equal-but-autonomous measure. While this essay might blur them on occasion, the boundaries between these disciplines remain intact.⁹ The underlying concerns and driving motivations for this project

7. Jasper, *Sacred Body*, 33.

8. See Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics*. Very near to our own thesis, Schwartz's suggests that the Reformers' rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation enables (even forces?) the sacramental to spill over into poetry, the arts, culture, etc: “Aspects of the Eucharist began showing up in the poetry of the Reformation, albeit in completely unorthodox ways” (7–8). Her last statement is key—this displacement of sacramental presence results in *unorthodox* expressions of sacramentality—expressions that scandalize and subvert traditional, orthodox understandings of the Eucharist.

9. This would be impossible anyway, as literary critic Stanley Fish has pointed out in his essay “Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do” (in *Free Speech*). Of interdisciplinary studies, he posits “either they are engaging in straightforwardly disciplinary tasks that require for their completion information and techniques on loan from other disciplines, or they are working within a particular discipline at a moment when it is

are theological, and indeed, insofar as they concern Christian liturgy and sacrament, ecclesial and ecclesiological. Our engagements with literature are not undertaken simply for the sake of adding another page to the volumes of secondary criticism on the works treated herein. Rather, they seek to open possibilities for theological thinking that theology has either forgotten or never fully known.¹⁰ Furthermore, in an era that has been described as “post-secular,” “post-Christian,” and even “post-atheist,”¹¹ the theological discipline seems to have become uncertain as to whether or not it still exists to serve the Church at all (so long as churches linger), or whether it must refigure its purpose as purely academic, whether that means being swallowed up under the canopy of “religious studies” or “sociology of religion,” or as a substrata of the humanities. On a kind of meta-level, therefore, this project is an attempt to confront theology with the delusion of its own self-sufficiency,¹² exposing it to a method of theological thinking that may reinvigorate or even reinvent it to address the changing cultural and intellectual landscape into which it desires to speak.

To summarize, then: this project explores the possibility of sacramentality, based upon eucharistic theology, which takes seriously the

expanding into territories hitherto marked as belonging to someone else . . . or they are in the process of establishing a new discipline, one that takes as its task the analysis of disciplines, the charting of their history and of their ambitions. . . . Nor is there anything reprehensible about these activities. Depending on one’s own interests and sense of what the situation requires, the imperial ambitions of a particular discipline may be just what the doctors ordered; and it may equally well be the case that, from a certain point of view, the traditional disciplines have played themselves out and it is time to fashion a new one” (242).

10. Without being presumptuous, it is our guess that the present work corresponds most closely to Fish’s second possibility: indeed, we are working within the theological discipline, and pursuing theological questions, at a point when the parameters of what theology *means* and *does* are expanding (or perhaps vanishing). As students of the interdisciplinary study of literature, theology, and the arts continue to develop hermeneutical tools that allows these discourses to be engaged simultaneously, a new discipline altogether has begun to emerge, wherein, for example, theological writing may be regarded as a form of literary or poetic discourse, and literature and the arts may be recognized as valid expressions of theology. Following Carl Raschke and David Jasper, we prefer to describe such interdisciplinary work as “theological thinking”; see Raschke, *Theological Thinking*, and Jasper, “From Theology to Theological Thinking.”

11. See Blond, *Post-Secular Philosophy*; Vahanian, *Death of God*; and Marsh, *Post-Atheist Age*.

12. Contra the theological program known as Radical Orthodoxy which seeks to subjugate every other discipline to the meta-narrative of Christian theology; for the most complete development of this thesis, see Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, esp. his final chapter (382–442). Cf. Milbank, John, et al., *Radical Orthodoxy*, for a representative collection of essays by many scholars whose subsequent work extends this agenda.

contribution postmodern literature and culture, which challenges contemporary Christian theology and liturgy to risk its own stability—and indeed to understand this instability as *grace* itself—while also calling attention to the sacramental and even specifically eucharistic traces that appear in contemporary literature, arts, and culture. It is precisely this scandalizing *risk*—this unavoidable (self-)deconstruction that yet clears the way for new constructions, uncharted possibilities—that fascinates us. It is a risk that, we assert, must be taken. As they endeavor to think what is for theology unthinkable, Christian theologians cannot afford to ignore the prophetic voices of literature and the arts, even to the point of allowing those voices to challenge theology’s basic assumptions and expose its scandalous, de/constructive core.¹³

To be clear, we highlight this inherent scandal not to undermine the validity of Christian theology and/or liturgy—this is not self-indulgent iconoclasm—but to reveal the cracks and fissures that always already exist in the foundation; to unsettle false and unexamined certainties about Christian thought and practice; and to clear the way for the kind of thinking (and the kind of worship) that is truly constituted by the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love. In short, we hope to expose Christian faith and practice to some of its tendency toward idol-worship—the idols of knowledge, power, and possession—and to point instead toward the “more excellent way” (1 Cor 13:1) enfleshed in the Christ event and re-presented in the Church’s eucharistic action.

THE TWO-FOLD SCANDAL OF SACRAMENTALITY: AN OVERVIEW

According to the writer of the Fourth Gospel, “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). Acknowledging the postmodern fixation on language and the body, we have chosen to explore the scandal of sacramentality according to a two-pronged thematic: that of the *word* and the *flesh*, of language and the body.¹⁴ By no means do we pit these two terms

13. In *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Slavoj Žižek unveils a similar hidden “core,” which he calls “perverse”; namely, an “internal gap” within Godself, exemplified in God-in-Christ’s self-abandonment on Calvary. As it relates to the present work, we would argue that Žižek’s “perverse core of Christianity” is given concrete form within sacrament, and is enacted within the symbolic matrix of the Church’s eucharistic celebration.

14. What we are calling the *two-fold scandal of sacramentality*—that of language and that of the body—is a heuristic at which we have arrived as a result of the influence of (at least) two key sources. The first is Louis-Marie Chauvet’s *Symbol and Sacrament*, whose postmodern sacramental theology has perhaps influenced this project

against one another; indeed, the overcoming of the dualisms and opposing binaries of *logocentrism* is central to postmodern thought. Rather, these two concepts represent distinct but parallel modes of the symbolic operation of the Christian notion of sacrament, exemplified by the Eucharist. Returning to John 1, the Christ event encapsulates the collision of word and flesh, the creative logos of God becoming incarnate within the created order spoken into being by that selfsame Word. The Eucharist, therefore, which points to the Word-made-flesh, Christ the “primordial sacrament,”¹⁵ makes present the co-occurrence or con-fusion of word and flesh: of language taking on a body; of the immaterial entering into and taking on materiality; of the sacred coming to inhabit the profane. So, not as a dualism but as a coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum* is the Cusan term),¹⁶ we shall explore the Eucharist and the notion of sacrament(ality), along these two trajectories, each of which are of central concern to postmodern thought.

This study is organized in two parts. Part One, “The Scandal of Sacramentality,” articulates the theoretical framework upon which the interdisciplinary explorations of Part Two rely. Three chapters comprise Part One. Chapter 1 (“*Skandalon*: Stumbling over Sacrament”) examines the concepts of sacrament and sacramentality, highlighting the inherent difficulty of defining these terms. In seeking to understand what a sacrament is, we shall look to sources ancient (Augustine) and modern (Tillich) to relate sacrament to both sign and symbol. In dialogue with theologians of the East (Zizioulas) and West (Rahner, de Lubac), we shall establish the centrality of Christ and describe sacrament as that which simultaneously *makes* and *breaks* the Church.

more than any other single work. Chauvet deals extensively with language as mediation (84–109) as well as the relationship between symbol and body (110–55). The other key text is Pickstock, *After Writing*, in which the author seeks to establish the “co-primacy of sign and body” in her account of the liturgy and the liturgical subject. She posits that “the coincidence of sign and body is most manifest in the event of the Eucharist” (xv).

15. See Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament*, especially §1.2, “Christ the Primordial Sacrament” (13–39). He writes: “Consequently if the human love and all the human acts of Jesus possess a divine saving power, then the realization in human shape of this saving power necessarily includes as one of its aspects the manifestation of salvation: includes, in other words, sacramentality. The man Jesus, as the personal visible realization of the divine grace of redemption, is *the* sacrament, the primordial sacrament, because this man, the Son of God himself, is intended by the Father to be in his humanity the only way to the actuality of redemption” (15). Like his contemporary Karl Rahner, Schillebeeckx also regards the Church as the “Sacrament of the Risen Christ” (see chapter 2, 47–89).

16. “On Learned Ignorance” (*De docta ignorantia*, 1440) describes Nicholas of Cusa’s notion of the coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*); in Bond, *Nicholas of Cusa*, 87–206. See Bond’s “Introduction” (19–36) for a helpful synopsis.

In chapter 2 (“*The Word . . .*: The Problem of Language”) we shall consider the scandal of sacramentality in relation to the basic problem of language, so thoroughly critiqued in post-structuralist and postmodern thought. The Eucharist originates with the symbolic and metaphoric speech of Jesus; is inscribed within the narrative and epistolary texts of the New Testament; and has been and is disseminated through the liturgical books and actions of the Church throughout history. Therefore, the *skandalon* of sacramentality is, on the one hand, a linguistic scandal. We shall think through the impact of postmodern shifts in our understanding of language and textuality upon the Eucharist in particular, attending to poststructuralism (Derrida), the radical theology of the “death of God” movement (Altizer), and the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, at the heart of all of which resides an anxiety about the ability of language to convey meaning. Guided by Catholic theologian David Power’s description of sacrament as “the *language* of God’s giving,”¹⁷ we shall relate sacrament to metaphor (Ricoeur) and arrive at what we wish to call the “de/constructive core” of sacramentality.

To restate, the idea of sacrament is, on the one hand, a language problem. On the other hand, an extension of the creation and the incarnation, sacraments convey spiritual presence to human bodies via the material elements such as the bread and wine. Thus the Christian conception of sacrament is also a *corporeal* or bodily scandal. This is the focus of chapter 3 (“*. . . Made Flesh: The Problem of the Body*”). The discussion shifts toward the issue of the Eucharist as embodied performance, as physical/bodily liturgical action; as well as the physical ritual instantiation of *God’s* body in the incarnate and crucified Christ, made mystically but no less *real*-ly present in the sacramental act. According to the narratives and creeds of Christianity, God first *speaks* creation into being, and then in the ultimate redemptive act, the Divine becomes enfleshed in the body of a woman; enters the world in the body of an infant; grows into the body of a carpenter from Nazareth called Jesus, whose body is executed on a cross and buried in a tomb. After that lifeless body is found missing from the tomb, it appears resurrected to hundreds of followers before ascending to the Father. The Church is described as the Body of Christ, a lingering physical presence of the ascended Christ within human history. In the Eucharist, the Church’s “quintessential sacrament,”¹⁸ the bread is transfigured as Christ’s body and the wine as his blood. The participation of Christ’s ecclesial body in his sacramental body constitutes the Church *as* the body of Christ, drawing individual members

17. Power, *Sacrament* (italics added).

18. Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics*, 7.

into the communion of Christ's body. To paraphrase Augustine's famous phrase, in the sacrament, the Church receives that which it is.

Hence, the body is of particular significance. Divinity wrapped in a body is not only difficult to conceive of but difficult to cope with as well; for where there is a body, there is pleasure and pain; hunger, eating, drinking and excreting; sensuality and sexuality. None of this sits easily with our common notions of the Divine or the Sacred. In addition to Jesus' words in John 6:63—"It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless"—and certain writings of St. Paul (e.g., Phil 3:3), our Platonic inheritance (which, it must be said, is not necessarily indigenous to the biblical witness, but has held considerable influence over the Christian faith) has led us to polarize flesh against spirit in such a way. But we must confront the truth that sacraments are, in Louis-Marie Chauvet's potent phrase, "the word of God at the mercy of the body."¹⁹ By the end of Part One, it should be clear that this two-pronged conception of language and body actually reveals itself to be an interconnected matrix of significance, such that the body-of-the-text and the text-of-the-body may be conceived as inextricably related; the "problem" or *skandalon* of sacramentality comes down to the (im)possibility of grasping the Body-Language of God.

Part Two ("The Eucharist in Literary and Theological Perspectives") undertakes a practical application of the theoretical framework outlined in Part One by engaging in close readings of select literary and artistic texts which demonstrate a theological thinking about sacrament and sacramentality, and about the Eucharist in particular. Some of these texts explore the Eucharist and/or sacramentality in fairly traditional ways (indeed, several of the authors have a literary imagination profoundly shaped by Catholicism), and others in a decisively *un*-orthodox, and hence scandalous and scandalizing, ways. We have found it useful to organize these explorations thematically. Chapter 4 ("Fracturing: Brokenness and Sacrament") considers the sacramentality of broken and wounded bodies in three novels, Graham Greene's *Monsignor Quixote*, Ron Hansen's *Mariette in Ecstasy* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. Mikhail Bakhtin's characterization of the degradation of the body in his study of Rabelais' grotesque realist fiction provides additional theoretical support for our suggestions about the sacramentality of the body broken.

19. Chauvet, *Sacraments*. This work's subtitle in the original French is "*parole de Dieu au Risque du corps*"—literally "the word of God at the *risk* (or *hazard*) of the Body." It would seem, therefore, that Chauvet is keenly aware of the scandalizing role the body plays in sacrament. Also note the dual meaning of the French *corps* as both *body* and *corpse*.

Chapter 5 (“Consuming: Cannibalism and Sacrament”) turns toward the virtually universal cultural taboo of cannibalism. Of course, cannibalism is something Christians have been accused of and the Eucharist has been confused with since its earliest practice, as witnessed in the writings of Justin Martyr and Tertullian. However, this aspect of the sacrament’s symbolic matrix—eating the body of God—must be fully confronted, not avoided or simply dismissed as ignorance or misperception. Two novels in particular, Patrick White’s *A Fringe of Leaves* and Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, depict cannibalistic acts in a sacramental light, whether implicitly or explicitly, serving as a reminder that this connotation, however taboo, is in fact an irreducible feature of eucharistic thought and practice, as evinced by Jesus “bread of life” discourse in John 6.

Süskind’s novel describes the closing scene of bodily consumption as an act of “Love”; chapter 6 (“Penetrating: Eroticism and Sacrament”) explores this transgressive theme further into the domain of the erotic.²⁰ There is a clear tradition within Christian history, especially amongst the writings of female mystics, of ecstatic and even amorous attachments to the Eucharist. The connotations of communing bodily with Christ—of ingesting him, taking him into oneself, being interpenetrated by him—are not hidden very far beneath the surface of the Eucharist’s symbolic matrix. We look to Aidan Mathews’ novella *Lipstick on the Host* as a literary examination of the sacramentality of sex, and the sensuality of the sacrament. However, a more deeply profane examination of the erotic is also close at hand. J. G. Ballard’s apocalyptic novel *Crash*, as well as the work of Georges Bataille, particularly *The Story of the Eye*, provide the literary resources for this final avenue of exploration. Here the collision of language and the body is most fully probed. Both authors are interested in the limits of language and story to communicate erotic experience; both seek a language by which to discuss the relationship between sexual and religious experience; eroticism and death; sacrality and profanity, pleasure and pain, presence and absence, brokenness and wholeness, beauty and the grotesque. We will assert this “erotics” to be the unvanquishable *skandalon* of the Eucharist, the a/theological, unthought and unthinkable de-stabilizing “other” of Christian sacramentality.

20. Jean-Luc Marion’s recent study of the erotic lends legitimacy to this avenue of exploration; see Marion, *Erotic Phenomenon*.

A METHODOLOGICAL NOTE: INTERPRETING SACRAMENT

This interdisciplinary project, which transgresses the boundaries of theology, philosophy, and literature, ultimately reveals itself to be an experiment in “sacramental hermeneutics.” *Hermeneutics*, the name given to the art or theory of interpretation, alludes to the Greek god Hermes, who moved fluidly between the divine and human spheres to deliver messages from one to the other. But as Joyce Zimmerman points out, Hermes, who on one hand enables communication between gods and mortals, “is also a thief and a trickster and patron of bargainers; he is the guide of souls to the underworld . . . [and] the wayfinder for travelers. All these images suggest to us that the art of interpretation is a tricky, multifaceted journey.”²¹ Considering these various faces of Hermes helps us to see that the basic problem is that of communication itself.

Communication, to which *communion* (and hence sacrament, Eucharist) is closely linked, only occurs by mediation. Hermes conveys the messages of Zeus, his father, to the mortals down below, and relays their response to the heavenly realms. Without the correspondent, the word of one interlocutor to the other would never meet its mark. In other words, Hermes’ job is the *translation* (“to carry across”) of messages across an otherwise uncrossable barrier. However, this translation is also *transgression* (“to travel or move across”), and Hermes is guilty of transgressions as well. Communication is tricky business wherever Hermes is involved. Messages might be lost or stolen along the way, or become tangled and twisted.

Further, and in keeping with Hermes’ many faces, communication is based upon a bargain between the parties involved, an agreement that words and messages will mean what they are intended to mean. This bargain, like all bargains, places a bet on the truthfulness of the interlocutor, and trusts that the linguistic or symbolic conventions established by previous experience will hold true once again. All communication is founded upon this extension of trust, and therefore entails a fundamental risk that trust will be broken and truth will be distorted.

Zimmerman offers another less commonly noted insight into the task of hermeneutics. She observes that Hermes’ name derives from the root word *herm*, “a square, stone post.”²² In noting this etymology, Zimmerman emphasizes the dialectical character of interpretation, namely that the stable, steadfast *herm* stands in stark contrast to the winged Hermes, always

21. Zimmerman, *Liturgy and Hermeneutics*, 5.

22. *Ibid.*, 5.

in motion. However, and in keeping with these multiplicitous meanings, might not this square stone *herm* also be construed as the *skandalon*, the stumbling block that obstructs one's journey or trips one up as she goes on her way? In other words, just as Christ is described as the "stone that the builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone" (Ps 118:22; Mark 12:10) as well as the *skandalon* or stumbling block to faith (1 Cor 1:23); that very thing which one might trust for surety and stability—the foundational post we can build on—might also de-stabilize, unfound, and cause one to stumble. Our assertion *viz.* sacrament is that the Eucharist fully and authentically re-presents Christ in precisely this paradoxical manner, as both cornerstone and stumbling block. And while this study makes the claim more by implication and interpretation than by irrefutable, empirical analysis, we shall conclude with the suggestion that, similarly, the arts—including but not limited to literature—have a similar function in their relationship to theology: one which de/constructs and destabilizes the foundational discourses of the Christian faith by providing a voice that theology simply cannot afford to ignore.