

Review of Kent L. Brintnall, *Ecce Homo: The Male-Body-In-Pain as Redemptive Figure*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press 2011, xiv + 220 pp., 8 Photographs, ISBN 978-0-226-07470-2

BY ARIEL GLUCKLICH, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY, USA

Ecce Homo is an excellent book about ambiguous representations of the male-body-in-pain, written by a young scholar, who is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies and affiliate professor in the Women's and Gender Studies Program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. But like much of its content, the book's achievement is ambiguous: impressive as a critical synthesis of cultural studies on gender and representation, problematic as a study of religious phenomena.

Brintnall's work is a close and readable application of Georges Bataille's methodological notion of 'transgressive expenditure' to the topic of masculine subjectivity. This is how Brintnall describes his agenda: 'Inspired by Bataille, I argue that certain ways of representing the male-body-in-pain have the capacity – not without complexity, not without risk, but the capacity nonetheless – to disrupt cultural fantasies of masculine plentitude that ground the social orders of masculine power and privilege' (8). At the core of this project is a fundamental ambiguity, defined in various forms of vulnerability, in regards to the ostensible power of the male figure in religion, culture and art.

The four chapters of the book, bookended by a useful overview of Bataille's thinking in the prelude and postlude, provide the contexts in which the author's revision of masculinity takes place. The first chapter considers the male hero in Hollywood's action films, with the usual cast of characters played by Sylvester Stallone, Mel Gibson, Claude Van Damme, Arnold Schwarzenegger and others. The task is to show that even the depiction of the powerful masculine body immediately opens itself up to an opposing reading in which vulnerability makes itself present. The second chapter critically discusses the faulty gendering that has distorted psychoanalysis. Based on the work of Kaja Silverman, Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud, Brintnall uses masochism as a corrective topic for

understanding the ambiguities of maleness. The third chapter, on Mapplethorpe's photographs, is enigmatically introduced by Bataille's reflections on the 'formless' as a representation of discursive thought (2011: 101–103). This chapter is the weakest among the four in the way it applies theory to data. The final (fourth) chapter provides a good discussion on the theme of crucifixion – that is, 'the reduction of flesh to meat' – in the paintings of Francis Bacon. The chapter traces the relation between the violence of the crucifixion and the violation of representation in Bacon's work – and links this to the vulnerability of the male body in artistic display.

The psychological and cultural examination of male vulnerabilities in these chapters is impressive in its subtlety. However, *Ecce Homo* is a more ambitious book, and threaded into the critical discussions of the male body are important ideas about salvation, religious experience and, indeed, the sacred. With these areas the author's indebtedness to Georges Bataille is comprehensive and highly problematic.

The book begins with Bataille's reflections on an infamous image of Chinese execution (*lingchi*) where the victim's suffering appears ecstatic and somehow erotic (2011: 2). The issue at hand is how images represent subjective experience, and Brintnall adheres to the notion that Bataille relies on violent images in the same way that Christian mystics had relied on the 'drama of crucifixion' (2012: 6). The religious moment, the ecstasy, comes from the destruction of the self in the body's agony and, ipso facto, the attainment, or at least hint, of ecstasy. This is the book's initial insight – the sacrificial domain. Building on this axiom, the erotic and the artistic domains are further areas where 'transgression' reveals and gives way to the sacred. The horror of the violence, the transcendence of the person in pain, these are the keys here. It is surprising that the author did not, at this point, engage with Elaine Scarry's thesis (*The Body in Pain*) on the problematic dialectic between the destructiveness of pain and the creative work of the imagination, or with my own examination of the concrete ways in which pain can be constructive of religious ends (*Sacred Pain*).

In a sense, the author's move is to translate Bataille's negative (transgressive) theology into a heuristic device by means of which the maleness of the body-in-pain (Christ's not least) does not occlude the ecstatic moment it (ambiguously) represents. Indeed, its very representation is saturated with the sort of ambiguity that has the potential to transgress comfortable (and alienating) order. As far as theology goes, this is a nice move, if Bataille's ideas about the sacred are accepted as persuasive. The main flaw here is the reduction of the sacred to religious experience (mystical, sacrificial). Some theologians might agree, but the majority of religion scholars will not. Although the relation between subjectivity and ritual is vital in religious psychology, there is here an over-determination of experience as the essential factor of religious life. In contrast, Bataille fails to notice that even the most violent sacrificial performance may ultimately centre on theologies of exchange, on social signalling, on political assertiveness and even on economic gain. Sacrifice in the ancient world, regardless of the victim's awe-inspiring violent end, could often fail to exceed the domain of work: it was geared towards all-too-concrete goals. And, while to the Christian mystic the death of Christ on the cross may represent the disruption of individual separateness, such a Christo-centric insight can hardly, on its own, serve as a method for understanding the total manifestations of the sacred.

But perhaps I am being unfair to Brintnall in re-emphasising the distinction between religious experience and the totality of a sacred life. After all, he does make it clear in the Prelude that Bataille's agenda is a transformation that 'flows out of a new awareness of what it means to be human, beginning with an experience of one's own nearness toward death' (2011: 24). I applaud Brintnall's enthusiasm for the transformative potential of such awareness within any religious context.