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Sheila J. Nayar's Dante's Sacred Poem: Flesh and the Centrality of the Eucharist to the "Divine Comedy" (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014)

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See table of contents

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Review of Sheila J. Nayar's *Dante's Sacred Poem: Flesh and the Centrality of the Eucharist to the "Divine Comedy"* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

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Recently I read the American Jesuit Paul A. Soukup's 2022 exploratory book *A Media Ecology of Theology: Communicating Faith throughout the Christian Tradition*. I discuss it in my somewhat lengthy online article "Paul A. Soukup, S.J., on a Media Ecology of Christian Theology" (dated December 24, 2022).

Over the years, Paul A. Soukup, S.J., in communication studies at Santa Clara University, the Jesuit university in northern California, and I worked together as co-editors of eight books (1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1995, 1999, 2002, and 2012) – seven of which are related to the work of the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955), whose work Soukup draws on in his 2022 exploratory book.
In it (p. 41), Soukup briefly discusses Sheila J. Nayar's 2014 exploratory book *Dante's Sacred Poem: Flesh and the Centrality of the Eucharist to Dante's "Divine Comedy,"* which came out in a paperback edition in 2016. Readers of *New Explorations* may recall that Nayar's 2010 book *Cinematically Speaking: The Orality-Literacy Paradigm for Visual Narrative* received the 2011 Marshall McLuhan Award for the Outstanding Book in the Field of Media Ecology from the Media Ecology Association.

Perhaps I should also mention here that Nayar's 2001 essay "Cinematically Speaking: The Impact of Orality on Indian Popular Film, 1950s-1990s" is reprinted in the ambitious 2012 anthology *Of Ong and Media Ecology*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (pp. 161-196). However, even though Nayar is familiar with certain aspects of Ong's work, she does not explicitly refer to his work in her 2014 exploratory book about Dante's. Nevertheless, in it, we find her explicitly referring to the predominately non-literate laity (pp. 35 and 182) and to discussing how the laity went from being celebrants in the Eucharistic liturgy to being visual spectators at it (pp. 20, 21, and 22; also see hearing Mass, p. 26). (I discuss Ong's work further below.)

For example, Nayar says, "The thirteenth-century hymn *Adoro te devote*, which edifyingly exalts the Godhead 'hiding' in the Eucharist, relegates seeing, curiously enough, to a lower level than *hearing*: 'Seeing, touching, tasting are in thee deceived:/ How says trusty hearing? That shall be believed . . . ' ('Hymns'). Nevertheless, the visual was culturally paramount – perhaps to no one more than Christ's uneducated, non-literate devotees. And so, eventually the esteem given to this ocular relationship led to the Church hiring a bevy of artists to visualize these concepts – in the form of altarpieces (both painted and sculpted), murals, stained-glass windows, and precious manuscript illuminations, each depicting 'the moment of the elevation [of the Host] with the priest standing *ad orientem*' (Van Ausdall 542). Theological concepts all but unintelligible to the faithful masses were, by these artistic means, rendered

more, if not completely, accessible" (p. 182; Nayar's italics).

In Nayar's 2014 exploratory book about Dante's famous poem, she operationally defines and explains what she means by the term "Sacred Poem" in the title, in Chapter 4: "Betwixt and Between: Dante's *Purgatory*." She says the following: "For many readers – perhaps most, these days – Dante's *Inferno*, with its imbricated horrors and colorful grotesquerie, is far more alluring than either *Purgatory* or *Paradis*. True, sin, revenge, and passion may evoke 'more life and dramatic movement than penitence and religious ecstasy' (Federn 284), but to miss – or intentionally elide – the other two canticles; to disregard their associatively vertical and horizontal powers; indeed, to read only 'Act I' and relinquish that act's very raison d'etre (its climax, its resolution, its ultimate *goal*) is arguably to deny the *Comedy* its sacredness. And Dante's *Purgatory* is not only symbolically, but also quite literally, the *pathway* to that sacredness – or, in another manner of speaking, it operates betwixt and between the 'backward' or 'wrong' realm of exclusively flesh-oriented and the 'right' or forward-looking realm of the inclusively divine" (p. 95; her italics; also see pp. 10, 159, 205, and 210-211).

Throughout her book, she dwells on how all three parts of Dante's poem are infused with Christological and Trinitarian theology – including certain parodies.
In Nayar's 2014 exploratory book, she also skillfully explores, as the book's subtitle suggests, the history of the Roman Catholic practice and of the theological theory of the Eucharist as central to Dante's semi-autobiographical *Divine Comedy* – that is, as central to all three of its parts: (1) the Inferno, (2) Purgatory, and (3) Paradise. It is semi-autobiographical in the sense that at the outset Dante the poet presents his now famous poem as being about his personal experience of what the Swiss psychiatrist and psychological theorist C. G. Jung refers to as a mid-life crisis. In addition, Dante the poet presents Dante the character as somehow a stand-in for himself, and the character named Beatrice in the poem as somehow based on a girl that Dante the poet encountered when he was a boy. (I tend to think of the character Beatrice as a composite based on various women who had been significant in Dante-the-poet's life – not just the girl that he had encountered as a boy.) As we might expect, many of the Italian characters named in the poem are based on real-life Italians that Dante the poet knew.

Now, Nayar does not explicitly explore Ong's work, as Soukup does in his 2022 exploratory book. Arguably Ong's most relevant discussion of the Roman Catholic practice of the Eucharistic liturgy is his 1974 article "Mass in Ewondo" in the Jesuit-sponsored magazine *America*. It is reprinted in volume four of Ong's *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1999, pp. 103-110). The participation of the congregation in the Mass that Ong describes strikes me as resembling what Nayar refers to as the congregants as celebrants at the Eucharistic liturgy (pp. 20 and 21).

Because Nayar discusses the hymns of St. Thomas Aquinas, Ong's most relevant essay about Aquinas is his "Wit and Mystery: A Revaluation in Mediaeval Hymnody" in the prestigious journal *Speculum* (July 1947). Ong reprinted it as "Wit and Mystery: A Revaluation in Medieval Latin Hymnody" in his 1962 essay collection *The Barbarian Within: And Other Fugitive Essays and Studies* (pp. 88-130). It is also reprinted in volume four of Ong's *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1999, pp. 1-44).

Regarding Beatrice's role in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, I would call your attention to what Ong

says about her role in dis discussion of the Muses in Western cultural history in his beautiful 1967 seminal book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*: “They [the Muses], too, are no longer public [in Wordsworth]. Muses had been interiorized and personalized as early as Dante’s Beatrice, under the combined forces of the Christian and the courtly love traditions. When they had become personalized, they no longer sang publicly, of course, but simply inspired by their beloved presence. They were private, as expression itself was growing private under the influence of writing, an influence soon to be intensified and brought to maturity by print. Wordsworth’s muse has realized a greater privacy than ever – she is hidden away, ‘a violet by a mossy stone,’ truly the poet’s own, not even allowed to grow to self-sufficient maturity, to flower so that others might possibly notice her, somewhat asexual, too young for her femininity to count for much” (pp. 253-54).

Of course, our present concern here is not with Wordsworth, but with Dante. In the Homeric epics, we find the singer/poet’s invocation of the Muses. But the Muses who are thus invoked do not enter into the respective epic stories, as Beatrice enters most notably into Dante’s *Purgatory* and *Paradise* in what Ong refers to her role as “interiorized and personalized” as Dante’s Muse. Of course, the Homeric epics represent what Ong refers to as the heroic age (pp. 202-207). Clearly, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is not a byproduct of a heroic age – just as the medieval quests of the Holy Grail are not byproducts of a heroic age. But this raises a fascinating question about Dante-the-character in the *Divine Comedy*: Is he the hero in his journey? If he is, what kind of hero is he? He is not an epic hero from a heroic age. See Nayar’s discussion of T. K. Seung’s argument that the *Divine Comedy* is “‘bound to remain essentially a travelogue [as is the *Odyssey*] without an epic hero’” (quoted on p. 193).

Similarly, we may wonder how to characterize St. Augustine of Hippo as the hero in his *Confessions*. In his travelogue, he does not emerge as an epic hero as Odysseus does in the heroic age of ancient Greek culture. Likewise, in the four canonical gospels in the New Testament, Jesus does not emerge as an epic hero as Odysseus does in the heroic age of the *Odyssey*.

In any event, Nayar says, “At the end of Dante’s *Comedy*, not only do we find ourselves having traveled through a threefold hereafter; given Dante’s explicit devotion to in-threed-ness, it is a hereafter that plausibly signifies *the threefold signification of the Eucharist* (p 199; her italics). She then turns to St. Thomas Aquinas who explains the threefold signification of the Eucharist as (1) “commemorative of the Lord’s passion,” (2) as signifying “ecclesiastical unity,” and (3) as “a figure of the divine fruition which will take place in heaven” (quoted on pp. 199-200).

Now, the Dutch Jesuit theologian Frans Jozef van Beeck, who was familiar with Ong’s work, explores the theory of the Roman Catholic Eucharistic liturgy and Christological theology in his lengthy 1979 ecumenical book *Christ Proclaimed: Christology as Rhetoric*. But I should also call your attention to van Beeck’s succinct 1991 article “Divine Revelation: Intervention or Self-Communication?” in the Jesuit-sponsored journal *Theological Studies*.

I hasten to add here that Nayar alerts us to watch out for exclusively Christological theology. She says, “Here, it might behoove us to consider what T. K. Seung refers to as the ‘marked contrast between medieval and modern conceptions of God’: ‘Whereas the latter has been almost exclusively reduced to Christology, the former was always systematically amplified to Trinitarianism’ (‘Bonaventure’s’ 141). For this reason, we find the Trinity narratively appearing in medieval places that would strike modern sensibilities as altogether odd” (p. 193).

Now, I would be remiss if I did not mention here that the doctrinally conservative Pope Francis, the first Jesuit pope, has discussed both the practice and the theory of the Eucharistic liturgy in his 2022 apostolic exhortation *Desiderio Desideravi (I Longed for the Desire): On the Liturgical Formation of the People of God* – which is available online in English and other languages at the Vatican's website. I have discussed it in my recent *OEN* article "Pope Francis on Catholic Liturgical Formation" (dated July 4, 2022).

Now, even more recently, the American Jesuit journalist and columnist Thomas Reese has discussed both the practice and the theory of the Roman Catholic Eucharistic liturgy in the following three columns in the *National Catholic Reporter*:

(1) "The Eucharist is about more than the real presence" (dated January 31, 2023).
(2) "The Jewish roots of the Eucharist" (dated February 6, 2023):
(3) "Eucharistic prayer is the most important and least understood prayer in the Mass" (dated February 14, 2023):

In addition, Timothy P. O'Malley of the University of Notre Dame has discussed the theory of the Roman Catholic Eucharistic liturgy in his article "Why Eucharistic Presence Matters" in the Jesuit-sponsored magazine *America* online (dated February 16, 2023).
In light of the richness of the reflections by the Catholic authors Ong, van Beeck, Pope Francis, Reese, and O'Malley about the Roman Catholic Eucharistic liturgy, can we hope to find further riches of reflection about the Eucharistic liturgy in the lengthy poem by the lay medieval Italian poet Dante – as explored by Nayar, who discloses that she is not a practicing Catholic (p. 207)? Yes, we can. (Disclosure: I am not a practicing Catholic.)

In any event, Nayar's 2014 exploratory book unfolds through the following parts:
"Preface" (pp. vii-xii);
Chapter 1: "The Immutable Feast of Dante's *Comedy*: Introduction" (pp. 1-16);
Chapter 2: "The Eucharist in the Time of Dante" (pp. 17-46);
Chapter 3: "Flesh Corruptible : Dante's *Inferno*" (pp. 47-94);
Chapter 4: "Betwixt and Between: Dante's *Purgatory*" (pp. 95-136);
Chapter 5: "Bread of Angels: Dante's *Paradise*" (pp. 137-204);
Chapter 6: "Conclusion" (pp. 205-211);
"Bibliography" (pp. 213-227);
"Index" (pp. 229-240).

In her texts, Nayar makes excellent use of in-text parenthetical documentation. She reserves her endnotes at the end of each chapter for discursive discussions. Her "Index" is extraordinary for its subheadings. Most importantly, her arguments are cogent – indeed, her book is the most cogently argued literary study that I have ever read. If you are interested in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, I imagine that you will find her book worthwhile reading.

Now, in Nayar's Chapter 4: "Betwixt and Between: Dante's *Purgatory*," discussed above, she says, "For many in today's secular culture, the sublime dynamism of such an encounter [of Christ's Body in the transformed bread in the Eucharistic liturgy] may have lost its edge. As a result, it is worth recalling that the quest for the Holy Grail was, in its literary origins, profoundly religious, a parable whose expedition was for the sake of gazing upon and adoring the

Eucharist" (p. 133). In Nayar's Chapter 5: "Bread of Angels: Dante's *Paradise*," she says, "Popular attestations that Christ *could* appear in the Host, of course, abound during the Middle Ages, such as in the early thirteenth-century *Quest of the Holy Grail*" (p. 194).

As secular as the twentieth century may have been, the most famous secular twentieth-century poem is T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), which is based, in part, on imagery borrowed from the medieval Holy Grail legends. In addition, after Eliot's famous religious conversion to Anglicanism, he published his notable 1929 essay "Dante" – which is reprinted in volume three of *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: 1927-1929*, edited by Frances Dickey, Jennifer Formichelli, and Ronald Schuchard (2021, pp. 700-745).

Now, also in Nayar's Chapter 4: "Betwixt and Between: Dante's *Purgatory*," she says, "As for the processing characters [i.e., the characters in the procession] who herald Beatrice (the elders, the beasts), their service as representatives of terrestrial authors or books that disseminate God's Word is hard to miss. At the same time, they drive home the extent to which, for medieval Christians, 'the Bible was as much an event as a book' (Hawkins, *Dante* 49)" (Nayar, p. 116). Her reference here is to Peter S. Hawkins' 2006 book *Dante: A Brief History*.

We may wonder what it may mean for the Bible to be a book and for it to be an event. Hawkins' wording here about the Bible as event calls to mind Ong's 1969 article "World as View, World as Event" in the *American Anthropologist* (August 1969). It is reprinted in volume three of Ong's *Faith and Contexts*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (1995, pp. 69-90).

Ong also discusses the word as event in the subsection "Auditory Synthesis: Word as Event" in his beautiful 1967 seminal book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (pp. 111-138), the expanded version of his 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale University.

For Ong, the world-as-event sense of life characterizes our pre-historic and pre-literate and predominately non-literate ancestors. According to him, the world-as-view sense of life emerged in Western philosophy in the works of Plato and Aristotle, and was carried forward in ancient and medieval culture in Western philosophy (and in Roman Catholic theology). However, according to him, the world-as-view sense of life became predominate in Western culture after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s.

Ong's pioneering study of the print culture that emerged in Europe after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the mid-1450s is his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason*. Peter Ramus (1515-1572) was a French Renaissance logician and educational reformer and Protestant martyr.

In light of Ong's perceptive discussion of the world-as-event sense of life and the world-as-view sense of life, we may align Hawkins' words "the Bible was as much an event as a book" for medieval Christians with Ong's words about the world-as-event sense of life (Hawkins' the Bible as event) and the world-as-view sense of life (Hawkins' the Bible as book).

Now, Beatrice emerges as a prominent character in Dante's *Purgatory* and *Paradise*, which Nayar discusses, respectively in her Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. However, despite Nayar's extensive discussion of Beatrice, I want to draw on another aspect of Ong's work here to

discuss how the character Beatrice might be interpreted.

In Ong's 1971 book *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (pp. 10-11), he makes the following statement about Erich Neumann's Jungian account of the stages of consciousness in his 1954 book *The Origins and History of Consciousness*:

> The stages of psychic development as treated by Neumann are successively (1) the infantile undifferentiated self-contained whole symbolized by the uroboros (tail-eater), the serpent with it tail in its mouth, as well as be other circular or global mythological figures [including Nietzsche's imagery about the eternal return?], (2) the Great Mother (the impersonal womb from which each human infant, male or female, comes, the impersonal femininity which may swallow him [or her] up again), (3) the separation of the world parents (the principle of opposites, differentiation, possibility of change, (4) the birth of the hero (rise of masculinity and of the personalized ego) with its sequels in (5) the slaying of the mother (fight with the dragon: victory over primal creative but consuming femininity, chthonic forces), and (6) the slaying of the father (symbol of thwarting obstruction of individual achievement, [thwarting] what is new), (7) the freeing of the captive (liberation of the ego from endogamous [i.e., "married" within one's psyche] kinship libido and the emergence of the higher femininity, with woman now as person, anima-sister, related positively to ego consciousness), and finally (8) the transformation (new unity in self-conscious individualization, higher masculinity, expressed primordially in the Osiris myth but today entering new phases with heightened individualism [such as Nietzsche's overman] – or, more properly, personalism – of modern man [sic]).

Ong also sums up Neumann's Jungian account of the stages of consciousness in his 1981 book *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (pp. 18-19; but also see the "Index" for further references to Neumann [p. 228]), the published version of Ong's 1979 Messenger Lectures at Cornell University.

For all practical purposes, Ong discusses what Neumann refers to as the uroboros stage in his beautiful 1967 seminal book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, mentioned above, when he discusses what Mircea Eliade refers to as the *omphalos*, or navel of the world (see pp. 163-164 and 296).

In my estimate, the character Beatrice represents Dante-the-poet's successful navigation of what Neuman refers to as stage seven of ego-consciousness. In my estimate, the Spanish Renaissance mystic St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of the Jesuit order, successful navigation of what Neumann refers to as stage seven of ego-consciousness is what the American Jesuit psychiatrist and Freudian analyst W. W. Meissner (1931-2010) describes in Freudian terminology and the feminine in the saint's life in his 1992 book *Ignatius of Loyola: The Psychology of a Saint*.

In a word, Ong sees Neumann's stage eight of ego-consciousness as maturity. In Nayar's Chapter 5: "Bread of Angels: Dante's *Paradise*," she says (p. 138) that James J. Collins

"argu[es] that *Paradise* is in fact Dante's real masterpiece, the fruit of his intellectual, emotional and spiritual maturity" in his 1989 book *Dante: Layman, Prophet, Mystic* (1989, p. 201). However, regarding the title of Collins' 1989 book, I do consider the medieval Italian St. Francis of Assisi (c.1181-1226) and the Renaissance Spaniard St. Ignatius Loyola to be mystics. However, despite the psychological maturity that I see Dante-the-poet as achieving, I do not consider him to be a mystic. Nor do I consider him to be in any serious sense of the term a prophet. He was a poet, and in Dante's *Paradise*, he works out an extraordinarily detailed poetic vision based on his medieval understanding of scripture and the Roman Catholic tradition of reflection on scripture. In it, his poetic vision is the byproduct of his extraordinarily fertile imagination, combined, of course, with "'his intellectual, emotional, and spiritual maturity.'" As to whether his "'*Paradise* is in fact Dante's real masterpiece,'" I am not prepared to render a judgment about that claim. For further discussion of St. Francis of Assisi, see the French Franciscan Eloi Leclerc's 1977 book *The Canticle of Creatures: Symbols of Union: An analysis of St. Francis of Assisi*.

Taking hints from Ong, I have written about Neumann's account of the stages of ego-consciousness in my essay "Secondary Orality and Consciousness Today" in the 1991 essay collection *Media, Consciousness, and Culture: Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought*, edited by Bruce E. Gronbeck, Thomas J. Farrell, and Paul A. Soukup (pp. 194-209).

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