CHAPTER THREE

THE POST-REFORMATION PASSION

In *Eikonoklastes*, Milton rejects Charles I’s appropriation of passion imagery in the *Eikon Basilike*, in which he compared himself explicitly to Christ on the cross. For Milton and his Protestant contemporaries, the only valid sources on which to base a representation of the Son were the scriptures. To understand how Milton created a passion that departs from the late medieval *Christus Patiens* tradition, it is important to recognize the contours of biblical precedent, the materials and methods it provides for the Reformation rewriting of the passion image.

The gospels were, of course, the source for medieval renderings of the crucifixion as well. But reformed artists and poets recognized that, taken as a whole, the gospels present a picture of Jesus as Son of God, teacher, pastor, and ethical exemplar. The biblical texts of Jesus’ human life portray his suffering death and burial, but they frame these events with a far more extensive treatment of his teachings and conclude with scenes of his heavenly afterlife. The gospels make available to reformers a variety of alternatives to the crucifixion, many of which were taken up by artists of the early church, and which could be reclaimed for a new expression of Christian belief that did not depend on iconography.

The variety of representations of Christ in the gospels derives from a fundamental quality of these texts. As Frank Kermode has shown, the gospels have a rich literary complexity:

> Writers in this tradition of storytelling are privy to the plot of God and to the thoughts of men and women. But omniscience, as Sternberg remarks, does not entail omnicommunication. One can be omniscient and reticent, as the Old Testament narrators are, and as Mark is; even John, as we have seen, does not tell all. It is a natural consequence of this traditional privilege that each teller may reveal and also withhold whatever he chooses so long as he is faithful to the fundamental story, which, in the case of the Passion, is a rigorous condition. But even here information may be reserved or inventively expanded.¹

The gospels operate through a dialectic of revelation and withholding, a technique that many early modern renderings of the passion narrative borrow. As Kermode’s reading implies, the gospels also create the possibility for additional retellings of the passion beyond the biblical texts. The Gospel of Mark, believed to be the earliest and the basis for the other gospels, presents the crucifixion in minimal detail. As Matthew, Luke and John expand and develop the outline of events in Mark, they establish a pattern that invites later writers to extend or collapse their narratives of the crucifixion as well. This flexibility in works derived from the gospels is also made possible by their episodic nature; in retellings any single event from the sequence might stand in metonymically for the whole. Finally, the gospels differ in emotional pitch, and each bears a different theological import. Whereas the earlier Gospel of Mark relates the agonized death cry of Jesus, ‘My God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (15:34) and thereby emphasizes the bitterness of His death, Luke rejects the implacable desolation of this formula in favor of the confident utterance of the Jewish evening prayer, ‘Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit’ (23:46), emphasizing that the work of salvation has concluded.2

These qualities mean that a writer approaching the story of the passion needed to make a number of aesthetic as well as doctrinal choices. No single way of representing these events is prescribed by their scriptural sources.

Awareness of the literary qualities of the gospels—as well as the variety of artistic precedents in early Christian art—allows for a fuller understanding of the Protestant poetry of the passion. Rather than the suffering and death of Jesus so highlighted in late medieval piety, English Renaissance portraits emphasized his Sonship and life. Michael Schoenfeldt has asked why the passion shifted “from being a site of the deepest imaginative engagement for medieval Catholic writers to a comparatively marginal subject” among seventeenth-century Protestants.3 His question assumes that because the crucifixion appears to be largely absent from their work, the passion is not a site of artistic

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