LUTHER'S POETIC READING OF PSALMS

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When reading and listening to Martin Luther's interpretation of Psalms, one is affected not only by the Psalms themselves but, likewise, by his poetic interpretation of them. This concurs with Luther's appreciation of singing and music. He stresses the "experience" and that the Psalms move the senses (*movere affectus*).[1] His interpretation of Psalm 23 may serve as an example of how the senses are involved in the reception of a Psalm: one is intoxicated by the grace and Word of God.[2] This intoxication puts the reader in a convivial mood. Luther's vivid evocation of how God prepares the festive table matches the emphasis in his theology on God's grace and on the beneficial effect of God's Word. God invites us to the table. The sensual aspects of tasting God and God's Word—rather like tasting delicious food—are emphasized.

Poetic and rhetorical analysis accompanies Luther's contextual interpretations. He uses images to relate the Psalms to the context of his readers and listeners and, sometimes, to highlight certain topics in a polemical manner. Such topics include Jews and Jewish communities, people associated with the Pope and women. The implicit warning with regard to my own interest in aesthetics and rhetoric is to be attentive to the misuse of poetic talk. However, my argument, as captured in the expression "po/et(h)ics," is that aesthetics can lead us to ethics.[3] It conveys the idea that the poetic is intrinsically ethical. Po/et(h)hics is not, however, meant to replace either ethics,[4] the concern for the good, by aesthetics/poetics, the

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[1] Cf. Martin Luther's use of "*movere affectusi*" as discussed by Gerhard Hammer, *Historisch-Theologische Einleitung zu den Operationes in Psalmos* (Köln/Wien: Böhlau, 1991), 390.
[2] Cf. Luther's interpretation of Psalm 23: *WA* 51: 268, 23-29; 288, 3-27; 291, 27-292, 7; 292, 33-294, 13.
[3] Cf. Ruben Zimmermann, "The etho-poetic of the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). The ethics of seeing in a culture of looking the other way," in *Verbum et ecclesia* 29 (1008), 269-92. Berhard Greiner and Maria Moog-Grünewald (eds), *Etho-Poietik. Ethik und Ästhetik im Dialog: Erwartungen, Forderungen, Abgrenzungen* (Bonn: Bouvier 1998). Wolfgang Welsch, "Ästhet/hik. Ethische Implikationen und Konsequenzen der Ästhetik," in Christoph Wulf, Dietmar Kamper and Ulrich Gumbrecht (eds), *Ethik der Ästhetik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994), 3-22.
[4] Cf. Martin Seel, *Ethisch-Ästhetische Studien*, stw 1249 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996).

concern for the beautiful or the senses, but to highlight the ethical moments within aesthetics.

I use po/et(h)hics in a broad sense interchangeably with aesthetics in reference to the Greek word *aesthesis*: perception, sense, etc. Po/et(h)ics implies that (right) perception leads to the (right) judgment, hence aesthetics to ethics. The conjunction of the beautiful and the good likewise finds expression in the Hebrew word *tov*. This is clearly expressed in Genesis 1, where God perceives and declares the created works to be good and beautiful.

At a methodological level, po/et(h)ics comes to the fore at various levels, beginning with the level of the text itself, as I consider those Psalms which have the beauty (of God) as their topic. Secondly, I shall investigate the aesthetic experiences induced by these texts, basing my arguments on poetic structure and language. I am interested in the est(h)etical interplay between text and reader(s).[5] The aesthetics of reception, which focus on the aesthetic and sensual experiences of reading and writing and not on the poetic quality of a text as such, provide the theoretical framework. Hence, this article pursues the question of how reading becomes an aesthetic and ethical process with transformative power. To this end, Psalm 27 will be investigated as an example. I shall focus on how the (perception of the) beauty of God transforms the speaker, whose longing to see God implies the realization of justice. As a second step, I shall make some general remarks on how po/et(h)ics enhance our understanding of the Psalms.

REREADING PSALM 27 IN THE LIGHT OF PO/ET(H)ICS

PSALM 27[6]

Of David

Eternal, my illumination and my saving liberation, whom shall I fear?
The Eternal is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be frightened?
When evildoers draw near to me to devour my flesh,
my adversaries and my enemies stumble and fall.
If an army takes up arms against me, my heart shall not fear;
If a war should rise up against me, yet will I be confident.

[5] Cf. Dorothea Erbele-Küster, *Lesen als Akt des Betens. Eine Rezeptionsästhetik der Psalmen*, WMANT 87 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2001; reprint by Eugene/Origon: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

[6] All translations of the Psalms are the author's own. I would like to thank the students of the Protestant Faculty of Theology in Brussels for the discussions on this Psalm during the spring term of 2013.

One thing I demand from the Eternal, I desire only this: that
I shall live in the house of the Eternal all the days of my life
to gaze upon the loveliness of the Eternal and to contemplate God's temple.
For God will hide me in a shelter on the day of trouble
and conceal me under the cover of his tent, set me high on a rock.
Now—my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me,
and I shall offer in his tent offerings of joyful shouts;
I shall sing and make a melody to the Eternal.
Hear my voice Eternal when I cry,
Show your grace to me and answer me!
For to you speaks my heart: see my face.
Eternal I seek your face.
Do not hide your face from me!
Do not turn your servant away in anger!
You who have been my help
Do not cast me off, do not abandon me,
God of my saving liberation!
If my father and mother abandon me
the Eternal will take me up.
Teach me your way Eternal
and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.
Do not give me up to the voracity of my adversaries
for false witnesses have risen against me
and they are breathing out violence.
What would be if I would not dare to hope to see
the beautiful goodness of the Eternal in the land of the living?
Put your expectations in the Eternal!
Be steadfast and your heart may show that it is firm.
Put your expectations in the Eternal!

Psalm 27 opens up in illumination. In a dense nominal phrase, the I-speaker describes the close relationship between God and her-/himself:[7] "Eternal my illumination and my saving liberation" (v. 1a). In the rest of the Psalm, we can trace how the light, indeed God's enlightenment, brightens the perception of the I. The affirmation in verse 1a is followed by a question, of whom

[7] In the German Luther Bible edition (*Die Bibel oder die Heilige Schrift des Alten und Neuen Testaments nach der Übersetzung Martin Luthers*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1982) with which I grew up the following sentence was written in bold: Der HERR ist mein Licht und mein Heil; vor wem sollte ich mich fürchten? Der HERR ist meines Lebens Kraft; vor wem sollte mir grauen? [The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid.

shall I be afraid? Even though rhetorical, the question evokes the possibility of fear. This builds up a kind of antithesis—oscillating between confidence and fear—within the first part of the verse. The wordplay and the alliteration between the two Hebrew words *ori* (my light) and *ira* (fear) hold both together.

The very first word of the prayer (Psalm) and the very last one as well is the name of God. The four Hebrew consonants *jod he waw he* (the Tetragrammaton) designate the name of God in the Hebrew Bible. As a name, it is untranslatable. In our translation, it is transliterated with "Eternal." A proper name allows communication and through it, one can directly address the other. On the level of the Psalm's structure, the name of God encompasses everything. It has an inclusive function. Whereas this opening announcement addresses God directly by crying out God's un-pronounceable name, the I admonishes her-/himself at the end of the Psalm to trust the Eternal one. Beyond this admonishment, the Psalm ends with the I-speaker crying out the name of God which embraces everything.

The speaker goes on to describe situations of trouble (vv 2-3), of being offended and surrounded by evildoers in which s/he nevertheless feels safe and confident. Speaking of an army camp, the verse uses military metaphors. Rereading the Psalm aloud, the sound emphasizes the emotion: similarly harsh consonants are repeated in this verse: *chet teht he mem*.[8] In the midst of this life-threatening situation, the I-speaker utters the plea (v. 4):

> One thing I demand from the Eternal,
> I desire only this that
> I shall live in the house of the Eternal all days of my life
> to gaze upon the loveliness of the Eternal
> and to contemplate God's temple.

The verb "to gaze" (*hzh*) in combination with the preposition "upon" stresses the closeness to the object. This construction expresses a participatory act. The loveliness of God stands parallel to the temple and is therefore perceived as space. The speaker is obsessed with a single desire: to contemplate the loveliness of the Eternal (v. 4).[9] The Hebrew radix *noam* is

[8] Günther Bader, *Psalterspiel: Skizze einer Theologie des Psalters* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 230, speaks of "alliterierende Paronomasie" [alliterative paronomasia].

[9] The form-critical literature deals with the expression in the context of the question of whether it is to be understood as a reflection of a cultic "Sitz im Leben." However, just labeling the Psalm with the so-called motif of hearing in the morning (*Morgenmotiv*) does not highlight either the aesthetic or the bodily experience of God. Cf. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Die Psalmen. Psalm 1–50*, NEB. AT 29 (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1993), 172.

used in the context of physical beauty (Song of Songs 1:16; 7:1; 2 Sam 23:1). In 2 Samuel 1:23; 26, it also expresses the closeness and delightfulness of a friend. It stands parallel to *tov* (good and beautiful) that describes the name of God in Psalm 135:3 (cf. Ps 147:1).

In his Bible translation (1545), Martin Luther refrains from the visual and concrete image of God. Translating it by the "beautiful service of the Lord," the aesthetic aspect is applied to the service of God that humans perform. However, the Hebrew Bible speaks of the delightfulness and beauty of God, and Luther also paraphrases it in his first lecture on the Psalms 1513–1515:[10] "the sweetness and joy in the Lord."

The sight of the I-speaker in Psalm 27 is absorbed by the beauty and resplendence or radiance of the Eternal. S/he begs for face-to-face contact, crying out (v. 8):

> For to you speaks my heart:
> Address my face
> Eternal I seek your face.

The I exposes him-/herself before the face of God. S/he goes on: "Do not hide your face!" (v. 9a). This expresses the striving for a relationship of mutual recognition: to see (vv 4; 8) and be seen (v. 9). The face of the Other reflects mine and mine reflects the face of the Other. In this sense, God is enlightenment. This light shall lead the speaker on a just and even path (v. 11).

The I asks for directions, i.e., for ethos; s/he wants to know how to live in the light of God. To see God's saving beauty and to stand up against evildoers go hand in hand. Aesthetics may highlight the precariousness of life. We could call this an aesthetic justice which is open to a perception of the unseen. Towards the end of the Psalm, the I expresses the wish to see God (v. 13) for the second time.

> What would be if I would not dare to hope to see the goodness of the Eternal in the land of the living?

The fragile hope of tasting the grace and goodness of the Eternal is expressed in a (negated) question. In the Hebrew word *tov*, goodness and beauty conflate, as mentioned above. It can stand parallel with *ifa* beautiful (1 Sam 16:12). Objects designed as *tov* are attractive.[11] Here, the

[10] *WA* 3:147–50.

[11] Cf. I. Höver-Johag, "Tov," in G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmut Ringgren (eds), *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, vol. III (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1986), 315–39; 318.

designation includes the ethical and aesthetic stance of God's grace. The I of the Psalm takes refuge in this hope and ends her/his prayer in this vein (cf. Ps 31:25). In the final verse the speaker tries to reassure her/himself with admonitions at the beginning and the end of the verse "Put your expectations in the Eternal!." At a formal level the repetition of this line creates an inclusion that highlights and embraces the appeal to her/his own heart in the middle of the verse: Be steadfast and your heart may show that it is firm. The heart, center of thought and decision, will show that it is firm. By its repetitive occurrence, the double admonishment ("Put your expectations in the Eternal") expresses reassurance. The poetic and rhetorical structure of the verse indicates firmness—the I is grounded in his/her orientation towards God.

Martin Luther describes this verse in two different ways. In terms of editorial criticism *avant la lettre*, it is described as a secondary verse. Theologically speaking, it functions on the poetic and anthropological levels as a conclusion with affirmative power: "This verse is like a small chaplet."[12]

Psalm 27 vibrates from beginning to the end with the longing to participate in the beauteousness and splendor of God. The eyes of the speaker are wearied by all the evil s/he sees. S/he finds herself/himself surrounded by people who try to devour her/him, to take her body. And yet, s/he states that if there is a war against her/him, s/he would not be afraid. The person desires to see afresh, that is, to see in the light of the goodness of the Eternal. The gaze becomes brightened by God's radiance and goodness. Indeed, Psalm 27 unfolds how our perception changes in the light of beauty and loveliness; seeing beatific loveliness sheds light on violence. As a critique of unjust situations, the awesome beauty of God destabilizes the worldly order.

As we have seen, this relation between aesthetics and justice is likewise underlined in Psalm 17 which opens with a series of pleas:

> Listen, Eternal, oh justice, decipher my crying, listen carefully to my prayer.

The noun "justice" is the third word. It stands alone in the middle of the plea (v.1a). The first translators stumbled and tried to smooth over the eruption of justice by linking it grammatically directly with God. The theme of the striving for justice pervades the Psalm. The Psalm employs justice as a relational term: God's justice illuminates mine (vv 2;14). The

[12] In a sermon (*WA* 49: 269-70) he calls the verse first a "Glosse" adding that it makes a round structure (Kränzlein). Cf. Erwin Mühlhaupt (ed.), *D Martin Luthers Psalmenauslegungen, Psalm 26-90,* vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 17.

I-speaker confirms, "From your face goes out my righteousness" (v. 2). Further corporality is linked to this theme, as justice is related to one's aesthetic experiences (v. 15):[13]

> In righteousness (justice) I will see your face;
> When I wake up, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.

When the senses awaken in the morning, the image of God saturates the I-speaker. His/her whole human being is affected. Finally, by seeing God's face, the body is saturated. Whereas in the beginning of the Psalm, s/he asks for a just judgment from God (vv 2; 3), at the end of the Psalm s/he states that s/he is now centered in justice (v. 17a). Justice as a relational term is realized in the uniqueness of the event. Taking up a term from Kryszof Ziarek, one could call this po/et(h)ic "justice":[14] "Quite distinct from the legal and ethical senses of justice, this 'justice' is eminently poetic, calling for a measure which displaces and decisively reorients the debates about justice." According to Psalm 27 and the just alluded to Psalm 17, po/et(h)ics reveals itself in acting over against those who perform unjust and treacherous deeds.

GOD'S PO/ET(H)ICS AFFECTING OURS

In a second and final step, some general features of po/et(h)ical and contextual readings of the Psalms shall be highlighted. Martin Luther's readings serve as impulse for our Psalter hermeneutics from a Lutheran perspective.

When reading the Psalms the issue at stake is the role of aesthetic perception, thus aesthetics for ethics. As has been suggested by Brian Brock, "Luther's ethics is not one of prescription but of perception and affection" implying that the manner in which he reads the Psalms renews his ethics.[15]

According to Greek philosophy, aesthetic experiences are threefold: *poiesis* refers to the productive and creative aspect of aesthetic experience; *aisthesis* refers to the receptive experience; while *catharsis* refers to the

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[13] Cf. Erbele-Küster, op. cit. (note 5), 187.

[14] Cf. Kryzysztof Ziarek, "Poetic 'justice,'" in Oren Ben-Dor (ed.), *Law and Art. Justice, Ethics and Aesthetics* (New York: Abingdon, 2011), 33–44; 43. A "justice" which "is to signal that neither law nor ethics, and certainly not imperial power/command, will serve here as the determining perspective," 34.

[15] Brian Bock in this publication. Cf. also Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture: On the Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

transformative and liberating one.[16] This tripartite model shows that a dualistic confrontation between an active and passive part in the reading of Psalms is a misleading shortcut. All three dimensions are at the core. Reception and production is intertwined.

Likewise, Psalm 40:4 in the Hebrew text (in most English translations it corresponds to verse 3) describes this interconnectedness between the poetics of God and our productive work: "And God gives in my mouth a new song, a psalm song of our God." This song emanates from God and flows back to God. In situations where one is desperate and lacks words, God provides new words. The song of the I-reader is God's song and, vice versa, the song of God is the song of the I-reader. God's beauty affects the speaker. In this effect lies a transformative ethical power. Poetics makes the Psalm writer and reader sing poetically. As we have seen in our interpretation of Psalm 27 and others, God's poetics affects the I-speaker and the exegete. In a sense, both coincide, a prominent example being Martin Luther.

LUTHERAN PO/ET(H)ICS

Martin Luther's language is picturesque and he himself becomes a poet; in his interpretation, he employs concrete images. He is rather explicit, almost graphic, in his descriptions. Martin Luther's poetic readings and rewritings of Psalms serve as a stimulus for our poetic creativity. When poetry (poetics) affects us viscerally, then reading itself may become an act with transformative ethical power. Luther calls this simply "the word," implying its effective and formative power. In his praxis, exegesis and enactment of the Psalms were interrelated. Interpreting the Psalms leads to singing and rewriting Psalms and vice versa if we are sensitive to the poetic and aesthetic structure. Reading Psalms in the light of Luther becomes what might be called committed reading and performing.

The introductory Psalm to the Psalter (Ps 1:3) uses an onomatopoetic word (*hgh*) for this activity of studying the Torah/Psalms. The sound of the word is felt in the throat, referring to a "desire in the throat" like the roaring of lions (Isa 31:4) and the cooing of pigeons (Isa 38:14). Studying the Psalms is thus not quite like the Latin translation *meditari* (to meditate) might suggest. According to the former monk Luther, it is (no longer) an exercise done by monks behind closed doors in silence, but a hilarious act in public: singing and speaking of the word.[17] In "Operationes in Psalmos"

[16] Cf. Hans Robert Jauß, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik* (München: Fink, 1977), 62f.

[17] Cf. Luther in his sermon "Die Lust am Gesetz," in Erwin Mühlhaupt (ed.), *D Martin Luthers Psalmenauslegungen, Psalm 1-25*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck

(1519-1521), Luther likewise underlines this beautiful metaphor when he calls the verb referring to Augustine's interpretation in the sense of the Latin word *garrire*, to twitter and chatter, as an exercise of hilarious birds.[18]

(LUTHER'S) TRANSLATION AS CONTEXTUALIZATION

Translators move between cultures and languages. Martin Luther spent a lot of time and energy on this activity. His translations of the Psalms and the Bible as a whole into the vernacular still inspire us today. In his afterword in the revised Psalter edition, Luther stresses his wish to be closer to the German, the language into which he translated the Psalms. They should sound like songs in the mother tongue and in the language of the context.[19] Indeed, as Georg Steiner phrases it, "The translator invades, extracts and brings home."[20] This idea is already reflected in the title of his edition of Luther's translated Psalter: "Psalter Deutsch" (German Psalter).

This goes hand in hand with the contextual uses of the Psalter in Reformation times. Most songs of the Reformation were first printed as broadsheets.[21] Whereas in the Reformed tradition from the times of Calvin onwards, the same Psalter Song Book has been in use throughout the ages, within the Lutheran tradition, the rewriting of Psalms and the composition of new Psalms became popular. The well-known hymn "Eine feste Burg ist unser Gott" is an outstanding example of this.[22] In a letter to Georg Burkhardt (1523), Luther asked if he would be like Heman, Asaph or Yedutun,

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& Ruprecht, 1959), 20: "Es geht nicht nur ums Meditieren, man muss (mit dem Wort) umgehen, gern davon reden und singen." (WA 49:223-32).

[18] Cf. Gerhard Hammer and Manfred Biersack (eds), *D. Martin Luther, Operationes in Psalmos, Teil II: Psalm 1-10* (Archiv zur Weimarer Ausgabe, Bd. 2) (Köln/Wien: Böhlau 1981), 42, Psalmum primum 1,2; See Lubomir Batka's essay in this publication.

[19] Cf. Luther, "Nachwort 1531," *WA.DB* 10/1,590,45f: "wie man mit Dolmetschen neher vnd neher kompt," and cf. "Summarien über die Psalmen und Ursachen des Dolmetschens" [Summary on the Psalms and Reasons for the Translation] 1531/33, *WA* 38:9-21.

[20] Georg Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language & Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,[3]1998), 314.

[21] Cf. Inka Bach and Helmut Galle, *Deutsche Psalmdichtung vom 16. bis 20. Jahrhundert. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte einer lyrischen Gattung* (Quellen und Forschungen zur Sprach- und Kulturgeschichte der germanischen Völker 95) (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1989).

[22] Roger Wanke (in this publication) referred to the contextual reading of Psalm 94 as a consolation in times of distress and a postwar situation in 1526. Being hosted close to the Wartburg, and after having made a kind of pilgrimage on foot up to the castle during the consultation, we were able to grasp Luther's rewriting of the Psalm.

meaning like one of the members of the Psalm guilds creating Psalms.[23] All these efforts to create vernacular songs lead to an empowerment of the community. In this vein, I would like to stress the necessity of "new" Psalms and the need for translations that are consistent with the hermeneutical presuppositions of one's own (community). Taking up the initial question of criteria against the misuse of Psalms they may be identified in the Psalm's contextual rootedness linked with poetic justice. Psalm 17 and 27 link the beauty of God to God's justice. The poetic and aesthetic senses thus make us aware of the beauty of the Other.

[23] Cf. *WAB* 3, 220.