Epilogue

As the seventeenth century progressed, it became increasingly difficult to preserve an instinctual or uncomplicated assent to the various transformative dynamics of the eucharist. The more alchemical aspects of the doctrine could not survive the harsh light of the dawning age of reason, and communion became commemoration: still central to the life of the church, but no longer a miraculous conjuring of God into the very mouths of the faithful. For a while, though, it was possible for a eucharistic understanding, in all its subtleties and gradations, to represent a primary intellectual foundation for poetic practice. The gaps that the Reformation opened between words and their meanings allowed the latter a brief afterlife in a kind of conceptual limbo: a horrified shrinking from the magic and mummery of the Catholic rite did not, at least for some, preclude an imaginative participation in its twin promises of divine presence and the performative power of the creative word. The writing that has been the subject of this book owes much of its richness to this conjunction of historical circumstance. The poetry of Southwell, Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, Vaughan and Milton is animated by a sacramentalism that is in some cases precarious but in all deeply held: to read their work in the light of this insight is to recover a sense of its particular force and reach.

Milton comes at the end of my list, and of this century and a half of possibility. Writers that follow his radical rethinking of sacramental belief can still, of course, feel an engagement with eucharistic theology and strive to express this in the cadence of their prose, or the figures and turns of their verse, but the intuitive faith in words and worship as analogous and efficacious is gone. The balance shifts from the spiritual to the intellectual – or rather, in the achieved interaction of rhetoric and religion, the word takes precedence over the Word. Jonathan Swift, born in the year that *Paradise Lost* was published, measures the distance a few generations has wrought: what these poets attempt in earnest, Swift rehearses as parody. 'I have deduced', the Dean writes in *A Tale of a Tub*, 'a Histori-theo-physi-logical

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Account of *Zeal*, shewing how it first proceeded from a *Notion* into a *Word*, and from thence in a hot Summer, ripned into a *tangible Substance*.'[1] David Nokes has described the attitude towards language exemplified here as incarnatory: 'Swift transubstantiates words into "things" to prove there's no trick in his argument.'[2] If he does so, though, it is from a very different impulse than the one that inspires the poets of the previous century; Swift, an embattled Anglican in a nation of Catholics and Dissenters, exploits the trope to demonstrate precisely that words *cannot* become things, as Nokes's shrewd quotation marks perhaps acknowledge. His whimsical conjurings offer an analogy, but it is a negative one: just as all the power of Swift's imagining cannot really make his words solidify, or accomplish the transformation of one substance into another, so the doctrine of transubstantiation must be mere empty assertion. When Peter, who figures the Catholic Church, tries to persuade his Protestant brothers that the bread he gives them is in fact meat, his bombast cannot convince and his words fail to perform. 'Look ye, Gentlemen, *cries* Peter *in a Rage*, to convince you, what a couple of blind, positive, ignorant, wilful Puppies you are, I will use this Plain Argument; By G— , it is true, good, natural Mutton as any in *Leaden-Hall* Market; and G— confound you both eternally, if you offer to believe otherwise.'[3]

Though some of Swift's literary predecessors would not have disapproved the end of his satire, its means might have given them pause. The rejection of the sacramental possibilities of language evident in Swift represents an impoverishment of the resources of meaning that continues to be felt, and indeed to demand creative compensation, in succeeding centuries; as Catherine Pickstock remarks, the eucharistic sign 'is able to outwit the distinction between both presence and absence, death and life', and poetry did not suddenly stop being interested in such matters when systems of belief were modified.[4] The late sixteenth and early seventeenth century saw a particularly close and productive exchange between eucharistic theology and poetic practice; subsequent generations, attracted by the idea that a word might be so rich in meaning as to share in the status of an act, strove to reformulate this connection. Faith in its authenticity proved rather hard to

[1] Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), in *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. by Herbert Davis, 14 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1939–68), 1. 86.
[2] David Nokes, '"Hack at Tom Poley's": Swift's Use of Puns', in *The Art of Jonathan Swift*, ed. by Clive T. Probyn (London: Vision Press, 1978), pp. 43–57 (p. 46).
[3] *Prose Works of Swift*, ed. by Davis, 1. 73; italics reversed.
[4] Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 253.

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retrieve, however. Even for John Keble, a leading light in the Oxford Movement that tried to 'reclaim the long-lost Catholic heritage of the Church of England', the emphasis is oddly secular: 'Poetry lends religion her wealth of symbols and similes: Religion restores these again to Poetry, clothed with so splendid a radiance that they appear to be no longer symbols, but to partake (I might almost say) of the nature of sacraments.'[5] Religion here is primarily a facilitator of beauty in poetry: their relation is detached (symbols are 'lent' between them, reappear not transformed in their essence, but merely differently dressed), and there is no sense of the intimate and urgent interconnection that so vivified the poetry of two hundred years before. In some ways, Keble is further from the position of a Herbert or a Crashaw even than Swift is: Swift secretly, at least, takes the notions he lampoons quite seriously. Keble's cautious parenthesis ('(I might almost say)') admits that he doesn't really believe in the terms of his own comparison: the suggestion that poetry is sacramental has become, in the end, just a figure of speech.

[5] Clark, *Eucharistic Sacrifice*, p. 6; Keble, *Lectures on Poetry* (1844), 2 vols., trans. by E. K. Francis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), II. 480, cited in Stephen Prickett, *Words and 'The Word': Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 48.

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