

Perspectives



If Thou Kiss Not Me

IN THE RECENT MOVIE *IN AND OUT*, WE OVERHEAR A FEW LINES OF A POEM BEING studied by a high-school English class. Unless I missed it, the poem is not identified. Intrigued, I spent an afternoon at a couple of local libraries tracking it down. With the help of various reference books, concordances, and anthologies, I finally located Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Love's Philosophy" (1819). The second stanza, part of which was quoted in the movie, reads:

See the mountains kiss high Heaven
And the waves clasp one another;
No sister-flower would be forgiven
If it disdained its brother;
And the sunlight clasps the earth
And the moonbeams kiss the sea;
What are all these kissings worth
If thou kiss not me?

But it does not always read thus. In some collections the penultimate line is, "What is all this sweet work worth." Which was the original? Why the variation? It is a classic case for investigative literary criticism, but alas no library to which I had even relatively easy access was able to provide material to solve the mystery. No author or editor that I could find made any reference at all to a variant reading.

So what? My investigation did not begin as an exercise in source criticism, but as a search for beauty. Critical tools helped me find my way, and I am grateful for them. Somewhere, other critical tools surely explain the different versions of the poem, and someday I will continue that pursuit. But my joy in the poem is not determined thereby. As we produce here another biblical issue of *Word & World*, my brush with Shelley might stand as something of a parable for my reading of scripture. Authors in this issue will help me find my way in Matthew's Gospel. The critical questions are intriguing, and they matter. Still, the point finally is to be kissed by Matthew's good news, not to stumble over this or that reading. Criticism guides us; it is indispensable. But the word itself is the point. "What are all these kissings worth, if thou kiss not me?"

Matthew himself seems to make the same case in a different way. In his programmatic introduction of Jesus' ministry, the evangelist reports, "So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted by various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jeru-

salem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan" (4:24-25). In fact, the fame gained by Jesus' healing gathers the crowds who become the audience for Matthew's primary presentation of Jesus' teaching and preaching—the sermon on the mount (which follows immediately upon the preceding text): "When Jesus saw the crowds...he began to speak, and taught them, saying:..." (5:1-2). Then, as soon as the sermon is completed, Matthew completes a literary inclusio by returning Jesus to the ministry of healing. The same crowds and the same maladies that were there prior to the sermon remain, still in need of healing: "Now when Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; and there was a leper..." (8:1-17).

Healing and crowds	Matt 4:23-25
Sermon on the mount	Matthew 5-7
Crowds and healing	Matt 8:1-17

In Matthew's Gospel, healing provides the occasion for Jesus' teaching, surrounds it, and provides an early clue to Jesus' purpose: "This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases'" (8:17).

Here, too, I think, is a clue to our own reading and study of Matthew. Properly to approach Jesus, properly to hear his teaching as reported by Matthew, is to join the crowd of people seeking to be healed. We welcome the adventure of the mind on which we embark as we seek to understand the historical background of the gospel, the literary forms and structures in which Jesus' teaching is cast, the theological trajectories and traditions that inform Matthew's own proclamation of the good news. That is a good work—and a necessary one for those who teach and preach.

Still, the teacher and preacher need to recognize their own need for healing as they approach the teaching of the Master. Though a challenging and rewarding exercise of the mind, our study of Matthew will not remain an exercise of the mind. It will involve also our hearts and our souls, our spirit and all our strength. Finally, in theology as in love, only kissings will do.

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