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The Disciplined Heart: Love, Destiny and Imagination, by Caroline J. Simon

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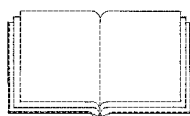
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BOOK REVIEWS

SIMON, CAROLINE J.: *The Disciplined Heart: Love, Destiny and Imagination*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997. – 214 pp.

Simon seeks a Christian understanding of human love. She does so from the carefully delineated vantage point of a Protestant, feminist philosopher. By choosing to relate and to analyze stories, S. suggests a fresh approach which uncovers the role of imagination as a means of discerning one's destiny (vocation) in God's plan of love. Imagination, for S., is the ability to see a deep truth about ourselves and others in the light of God's truth. Among the types of true love, she names and treats neighbor love, romantic love, marital love and inter-gender friendship; she names and excludes from consideration (for lack of time and space) love between parents and children, between siblings, and among citizens in a republic.

This work of narrative philosophy is divided into six chapters. S. begins by contrasting imagination and fiction-making. Quoting Graham Greene, she says that "hate is just a failure of imagination", whereas love is the fruit of imagination – if and as it allows one to

see the other as a being created and sustained by God in the divine image and likeness. Imagination sees the destiny of the other as mysterious and eschatological, yet also historical and concrete, for grace builds on nature, and the perfect love of the communion of the saints is prefigured in true, if imperfect, human love in this life. She defines love as "a complex disposition that involves being disposed to perceive people in certain ways, act towards them in certain ways, and experience certain feelings" (30). Because the love of a believer involves both faith and hope, it needs the power of imagination to discern the true good of the other and to seek to understand one's own place in the destiny of the other. Cases of false love involve not imagination but fiction-making; in the story of Tristan and Isolde, the lovers' failure to discern the tragic consequences of their passion is precisely a failure of imagination – they do not seek to construe the story of their lives in terms of a greater narrative written by God.

S. proceeds to sketch out the necessity of self-knowledge for love's sake by dialoguing with two stories. Flannery O'Connor's "The Lame Shall Enter First" allows S. to explore the destructiveness of self-deception. Leo Tolstoy's "Father Sergius" suggests a pathway to overcoming self-deception: humiliations

as stepping stones to true humility. To see oneself truly is to weave one's own life-story into God's story, an act of grace-filled imagination. This insight then allows one to know and love one's neighbor as a similarly grace-destined individual. This is expanded upon as S. tells the story of Francis Phelan, protagonist of William Kennedy's *Ironweed*. Even in the bleakest of human lives, there is hope, for there is always a neighbor whom one can recognize as neighbor, as fellow recipient of the divine imprint. In an interesting excursus on *agape*, the Protestant S. analyses and rejects Anders Nygren's strong defense of an extreme Lutheran position on the inability of human beings after the Fall to love selflessly. Instead, she sides with Pascal, who proposed a middle way: "while acknowledging our and our neighbor's wretchedness, we should not lose sight of the fact that it is a wretchedness of dispossessed royalty" (86).

S. then explores the contours of friendship exemplified in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby and Nick become friends late in their acquaintanceship, only when Gatsby finally tells his true story to his neighbor. In this truth-telling there is healing, a fact which allows S. to explore the benefits of friendship, chief among which are the myriad opportunities to move from fiction-making (the deception

of self and others) to imaginative truth telling (the pursuit of our true destinies in God's plan). In this there is a trace of the joy and the duty of evangelization: "Caritas is the love based on an infinite hope that someday everyone will be God's friend" (107). This sets the stage for the most interesting section of the book, in this reader's opinion, the chapter on romantic and marital love. Playing with the plot lines and the characters of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Wallace Stegner's *Crossing to Safety*, S. makes a case for the positive inclusion of romantic idealization in marital love. The lover can and should perceive the beloved through a cloud of bias: an ideal destiny that is ordered by God. Marital love is a relationship wherein the spouses continue to view each other through this lens; spouses are able to love each other in a committed and faithful relationship if and as each continues to seek to see the ideal destiny of the other and to contribute to that destiny's fulfillment.

S. includes an examination of the possibilities and the pitfalls of inter-gender friendship between two people who are not married to each other. Can men and women be chaste friends, or does sexual attraction preclude this? By parsing a published collection of letters between a divorced woman writer and a married male college professor, S. concludes that such friendship is possible, but (as with all types of true love) only between persons with disciplined hearts. The vows under which one is living, the safe space that distance affords them, and the wonderful medium of letter-writing all conspire to support this particular case of love, from which S. extrapolates general guidelines for inter-gender

friendships that may well include closer physical proximity, yet which avoid sexual ambiguity. That there may at times be temptation in such friendships is acknowledged, even welcomed: "this tension is a spiritual good if it is recognized and blessed for what it is: a call to joyful renunciation that necessitates a conscious reliance on grace" (166), though the two are also cautioned to rely on common sense.

This is an enjoyable book to read, and while the reader will profit even more if he or she has read at least some of the novels and short stories alluded to in the text, this is not necessary for the reader to understand and follow S.'s argument. Personally, I was intrigued by the number of Catholic examples (the friendship between François de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal), and Catholic authors which S. chooses to cite, e.g., O'Connor, Fitzgerald, Kennedy and, to stretch the point a bit, T.S. Eliot, an Anglo-Catholic. S. does a great job uncovering the role of imagination in love, yet she leaves unexplored the importance of image, symbol and sacrament. While she acknowledges her debts to unnamed Catholic scholars (3), she chooses to converse with a fairly limited number of Protestant theologians, even as she claims to explore the broad Christian tradition. Readers would do well to complement this work with readings from such Catholic theologians as David Tracy, *The Catholic Analogical Imagination*, and Elizabeth Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*. The possible fruitfulness of a Catholic-Protestant dialogue on imagination and destiny is suggested by Isak Dinesen's "Babette's Feast", which S. treats in her epilogue. Dinesen has sketched a humorous and touching collision of two worlds, a Pietistic and a

Catholic one, wherein transubstantiation and reconciliation occur by God's grace around a table. S. too quickly lumps Paris and Stockholm together, conflating and confusing a Catholic and a Lutheran world view, and missing thereby a chance for ecumenical dialogue to further enhance her central theme of the role of imagination in seeing and agreeing to our destinies as woven in love by God. These suggestions aside, S.'s book should be read by students of love and marriage who enjoy a good story.

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HOFER, MICHAEL: *Nächstenliebe, Freundschaft, Geselligkeit: Verstehen und Anerkennen bei Abel, Gadamer und Schleiermacher*, München: W. Fink, 1998. – 298 S.

Unter den drei einladenden Grundworten zeigt der Buchumschlag die farbige Abbildung (ohne Angaben dazu, es handelt sich um eine Holztafel aus dem Innsbrucker Volkskunstmuseum) des bekannten Vogels Selbsterkenntnis mit der Devise: »Zieeh sich ein yeyts selbst bey Der Nasn – Waß dich nit Brendt Thue auch nicht Blasn«. Dann trifft man auf drei Motti: Apg 8,30; ein »Lebewohl« (nach W. Benjamin) Fr. Schlegels an Schleiermacher mit dem Vorschlag der Hypothese, dieser habe ihn nie verstanden; die Charakterisierung einer Doderer-Figur durch ihren Autor (im Sinn von Sokrates' bekannter Auskunft zu Heraklit). Mit den Titel-Worten sind dann im Inhaltsverzeichnis die drei Teile der Studie überschrieben (in Klammern dahinter je einer der drei Namen); aber näherer Hinblick