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Georges de La Tour and the Enigma of the Visible. Edited by Dalia Judovitz

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Rediscovered in the early 20th century, mystery still surrounds the French Counter-Reformation painter Georges de La Tour (1593–1652) or why his later works tended to be reattributed to other painters. Mystery also lies *within* his known paintings, beautifully and painstakingly discussed by Dalia Judovitz in this book. Though briefer and more focused on the one artist, her work in some sense provides a counter-balance to Joseph Leo Koerner's great work on the art of the Protestant Reformation, *The Reformation of the Image* (2004).

This is an exemplary exercise in interdisciplinarity, though in the final analysis a work of theological reflection that indicates that we now must all dare to trespass upon a number of disciplines to begin to articulate the mystery of religion within culture. Judovitz's book offers itself as work of art history, but it is far more than that. For the enigmatic, haunting paintings of La Tour demand profound theological categories as they call upon our visual attention to move beyond that which can be seen, from the visible to the invisible in La Tour's interplay in illumination of light and darkness and the mystery of light that shows us that which cannot be seen. In these paintings, too, we continually cross borders between the sacred and the profane, finding the sacred within the profane, and Judovitz guides us with a steady hand, only now and then tending slightly towards the over-simplification of the biblical texts that lie at the heart of these paintings of incarnation, guilt and repentance and deception. But that is to carp.

There are largely hidden intellectual foundations to this work, ensuring its strength and discipline. In her acknowledgments, Judovitz recognises the influence of Louis Marin, René Girard, Jacques Derrida, and Rodolphe Gasché. Their presences are indeed felt. Sadly, there is but one brief reference to Jean-Luc Marion and his thinking on the idol (p. 84), and this might have been given more space as his thinking, a French Catholic like La Tour himself, haunts many of the fine meditations on the individual paintings.

These individual readings of pictures are the heart and soul of the book. Judovitz sees well, and with great intelligence and sensitivity, into the enigma of the visible in La Tour's paintings. She makes us better 'readers' of their texts, frequently stretching the artist's work back to such sources as Voragine's *Golden Legend*, or, more important, the biblical texts themselves. For example, being reminded of the central importance of *chiasmus* in the New Testament, in *The Magdalene with Two Flames*, we are shown how the 'pictorial use of the mirror recalls its biblical rhetorical function but transposes the relevance of its chiastic projections to the visual realm of painting' (p. 27). That transposition is repeated in various ways as we find paintings (after St Peter and his denial) in acts of betrayal, or, most beautifully for me, in the moment of dream vision as in *The Dream of St. Joseph*.

In her exact readings of these deceptively complex, deeply iconic paintings, Judovitz gives us, time and again, precisely the right sentence to be our guide. For example, she writes, La Tour's paintings reveal 'the conditional nature of the visible on determinations that escape its purview' (p. 31). His art renders us blind, if we take enough care, so that in our unseeing we begin to see the mystery. They are also paintings to be listened to, and 'read', being full of books, and above all the Bible seen as the 'divine word and source of spiritual illumination' (p. 47).

Judovitz gives her closest attention to the most mysterious of all La Tour's paintings, usually known as *The Flea Catcher* (c. 1630–34).

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Dispensing, it would seem with all the accoutrements of religious allegory and symbolism, this picture glows with a sacred quality and light that is lost in negations and questions. A beautiful, barely clad young woman de-fleas herself—or is she telling her rosary, her hands clasped above her clearly pregnant belly? Almost half the painting is taken up with an empty, simple red chair, supporting a candle as the only evident

source of light. There is no hint of eroticism or self-consciousness. For once Judovitz's summary has a slightly prosaic quality when confronted by this extraordinary painting, though what she says is true, nonetheless, of 'how this puzzling painting negotiates the transfiguration of ordinary reality into spirit through its treatment of the mundane content' (p. 82).

In short, we might say, theology and spirituality should not be left simply to the theologians and clergy. This excellent and dense short book reveals the theology both within and through the paintings of Georges de La Tour, painting in an age of Protestant iconoclasm and after the Council of Trent. As La Tour's strange and extraordinary ventures with light render the visible invisible, or reveal the invisible reality at the heart of all things, so he celebrates at once, 'painting's ostensible 'death' even as it outlines the possibility of its redemptive renewal' (p. 103). Here we do not simply read or even 'see' theology, but we are veritably caught up within its realities of death and redemption.

This is an important book that will challenge and inform. It is beautifully illustrated with many of La Tour's most important paintings in colour.

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