

Reviews

CHRIST THE FORM OF BEAUTY: A STUDY IN THEOLOGY AND LITERATURE BY Francesca Aran Murphy. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995 pp. vii + 236, n.p. hbk.

Where is beauty to be found? In the landscape and the sunset? In the smile of a face, the movement of a hand, the lineaments of a body? In objects of art? The seraphic madonnas of Leonardo da Vinci? The becalmed sheep and sliced cows of Damien Hirst? Or is beauty to be found where it is least expected, in the display of a scourged and bleeding body, a victim of torture? On the front cover of Francesca Murphy's book, *Christ the Form of Beauty*, is an icon of Christ crucified, arms stretched out, blood flowing from his wounds. Under the arms of the cross stand the reduced figures of St John and the Virgin, heads bowed, hands gesturing to the impaled corpse. Christ is naked, except for a blue cloth, knotted across his groin so as to indicate—while concealing—his genitals, his pelvis thrust forward in the direction of his mother.

In a culture which holds that beauty is to be found in the eye of the beholder (and so everywhere and nowhere), the Christian aestheticisation (and eroticisation) of a tortured male body draws attention not so much to the image as to its maker: the Christian culture that makes of horror an image of glory. Of course it is only one image from a narrative series, which includes the transformed, resurrected body of Christ; yet not so changed that its sublime flesh no longer bears the marks of its torture. And of course this is the theology of John's Gospel, which sees the glory of God in the agony of Christ. It is this startling perversity of the Christian imagination that makes reading Francesca Murphy's book both interesting and perplexing, if finally disappointing.

Christ the Form of Beauty is challengingly unfashionable, for it is about the transcendentals of 'being', 'truth', 'the good' and above all 'beauty', bewitchments—as some might think—of language; but here understood as concrete realities, convertible modalities of the world's being, and thus proper names for its source: the glorious being of God. Murphy's argument is that these transcendentals are the 'metaphysical presuppositions of Christology'; though their acceptance requires 'conversion' (p.200).

For readers uncomfortable with the notion of spooky 'transcendentals'—who will read a section entitled 'Do the Transcendentals Exist?' with much interest if less illumination—it might be well to start reading the book from the end, from its appendix on 'The Scholastic Use of the Term "Transcendental"'. Here the reader will learn

that the transcendentals are properties common to every existent, of which the first is 'being', since everything that is, is. 'Truth' is the relation of being to mind, and so universal, since all being is known by God if by no one else. The 'good' is desired by all being, the *telos* which attracts it toward perfection, and so equally universal. The medievals were a little less certain about 'beauty', some associating it with truth, others with the good. Murphy's appendix also indicates that for the medievals the transcendentals were properties regulating reality, while for moderns (for whom Kant stands representative) they are ideas regulating thought (language). It is precisely in the juncture between these two conceptions—between the ontological and the linguistic—that Murphy's argument is situated.

Murphy wishes to oppose two possibilities: on the one hand, a naive positivism which supposes that concrete reality can be known cleanly, unsullied by semiosis, by metaphorical mediation; and, on the other hand, a linguistic idealism which supposes reality the variable effect of semiotic system, the phantasm of an abstract structure which is productive alike of 'self' and 'world'. Against these Murphy argues—rightly in my opinion—for a third possibility which upholds the extra-semiotic while insisting that it is always and only known intra-systematically. At least this is how I have read her. Thus the transcendentals are not mere abstract nouns, empty talk, but truthful medians of reality, of that being which transcends while informing all particular beings.

'Beauty' is being known through 'form', and the artist is one who makes forms which show forth the beauty of being. Thus Murphy's argument proceeds from a discussion of the transcendentals—drawing on the work of Jacques Maritain—to a consideration of a group of American writers and poets—John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon and William Lynch—who held, on Murphy's reading, that 'language can be moulded into artistic forms, which are analogues of the transcendentals' (p.43). Thus a large part of her book is concerned with their theories of literary production; however her underlying interest is theological—her understanding of semiosis, and above all of the transcendentals, finally making sense only within a theological frame—and thus the last part of the book, which is also its focus, is a consideration of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics.

Against the Kantian 'sublime'—which has become the postmodern sublime in the work of someone like Jean-François Lyotard—Murphy argues that not only is 'form' the locus for knowing 'beauty', but that beauty requires discrete form in order to be seen. The Kantian/postmodern sublime—on Murphy's reading—is a sense of awful infinity without anchorage in nature; an unrepresentable void, the absence of being. Against this, Murphy argues for a Christian, incarnate 'sublime', the divine glory given in particular form in Christ, himself given in the mythic story of his life, death and resurrection; in the impress of his form on the lives of the saints, concretely figured in the gift of the stigmata.

This book is a rich confection, tending to the indigestible; I have indicated only some of its many ingredients. It is given to rhapsodic moments, but for the most part it is tersely written. I found its own form elusive, having the impression that it approached its subject—the incarnation as the 'archetypal manifestation of beauty' (p.208)—from many different places all at once. I was irritated by several of its critical asides, aimed as they are at idealist 'postmodernists' (Kevin Hart being the worst offender), but whose real faults seem to be that of holding a position too close to Murphy's own. But my chief worry with the book is that, while it warmly welcomes Hans Frei's stress on the scriptural story as the 'form' in which Christ is to be known, that form is so abstractly rendered that it is in danger of occluding the 'perversity' of the Christian imagination. While agreeing with Murphy that the scripture is a 'work of art', but 'no escapist fantasy' (p.207), an icon of Christ 'embodying in the flesh both the cross of meaningless[ness] and the resurrection of meaning' (p.149), I nevertheless miss in her account a real sense of that fleshliness, and thus of its undecidability; a MacKinnonesque perplexity at the shock—and perverse ambiguities—of seeing beauty in horror.

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A VISION BETRAYED. THE JESUITS IN JAPAN AND CHINA, 1542-1742. By Andrew C. Ross. *Edinburgh University Press, 1994.* pp.xvii + 216. £29.95

Both the specialist and non-specialist reader will find Ross's latest book on the history of the Jesuit missions in Japan and China both stimulating and provocative in more ways than one. The author, who has written on mission history and theology before, and in particular in relation to Africa, now approaches the Jesuit enterprise in East Asia from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century with several important questions, which—remarkable as it may seem—have often been overlooked by the experts in the field, and namely: what exactly was it that the Jesuits were trying to accomplish in Asia? Was there an *underlying vision* that inspired these missionaries and which would account for their choice of one course of action over and against another? And finally, why did their pioneering efforts end in such apparent and total failure in both Japan and China? The search for some possible explanations has resulted in the present volume. The book, consisting of two parts (Part I on Japan and Part II on China), opens with an introduction that briefly sets the scene by providing an *apologia* of the author's decision to undertake an analysis of the history of both the Japanese and Chinese missions within the covers of a single book. While duly acknowledging that the two present quite different historiographical questions, Ross convincingly argues that they can be studied together, insofar as they were both to a large extent part of a unified missionary strategy developed by Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606). He was appointed in 1573 as the personal delegate of the Jesuit General Superior in Rome (hence his title of 'Visitor') to Asia, and

252