

DAVID JONES AND THE CRAFT OF THEOLOGY: BECOMING BEAUTY by Elizabeth R. Powell, *T&T Clark*, London, 2020, pp. xvi + 152, £85.00, hbk

This book is a theological exploration of David Jones's theology. While the book's title talks of Jones's theology in general, Elizabeth R. Powell has chosen to concentrate on three of Jones's works, or 'artefacts', in order to present a detailed examination of his theology and how his art can be understood within a theological framework. The works she considers are: a poem; a painted inscription; and a wood engraving. Through a detailed analysis Powell brings out ideas and explores the interconnectedness of Jones's theological thinking with that of other Christian theologians. She takes the opportunity not only to examine Jones's theology via his artistic production, but to explore how these works of art function in a theological frame and connect to the Roman Catholic Church's liturgical cycle.

Powell has put a great deal of work into this book, her scholarship is thorough. She has read, looked at and examined most if not all of Jones's writings and visual production. She has read if not all, then most, of the secondary literature on David Jones. She has read and examined those works, thinkers, artists, and craftsmen whom Jones claimed to have influenced his thinking and artistic production. She has a strong command of primary and secondary sources. In many ways she 'gets' Jones. For instance, she is able to explain well his theology of 'Art as Sacrament' and man's (and woman's) true nature as 'Sacramental Sign-Maker'; Jones believed that through our creations, be they a loaf of bread or a battle-axe, we become sign makers and create something real and therefore good and therefore sacred.

Though this is a shortish book, 136 pages from Introduction to Conclusion, with detailed and appropriate footnotes, it is not an easy read. The writing style is dense with academic and technical language. A fair number of foreign words and phrases are left untranslated. On a number of occasions, I found myself forced to re-read not merely sentences but whole paragraphs to grasp what the author was trying to say. While this would have been fine if I had felt that the struggle was worth it, I was often left feeling that Powell could have expressed herself more simply and to the point. In fact, I found some sentences simply too stuffed with ideas so as to reduce them almost to non-meaning. There's a sort of will-o'-the-wisp quality to these sentences that left me snatching at ideas that were not quite worked through.

The arrangement of this book follows the usual lines, with Introduction, Chapters and a Conclusion. Personally, I find it helpful to have an introduction that sets out what the author is looking at, why she is writing about it, and what she hopes to discover. In the conclusion I find it helpful if I can be reminded of what the author has explored, the discoveries she

has made, and conclusions that she has reached. Powell does not signpost, clarify and make explicit her theories and findings. This book explodes with ideas, but I find it very difficult to hold in my mind any narrative as to the progression and development of her argument.

In her first chapter, Powell explores Jones's well-known poem 'A a Domine Deus'. In 30 pages, she embarks on a literary criticism-cum-theological exploration of the poem. She understands the work as the journey of a pilgrim poet in search of God in a world littered with objects absent of God. She makes connections between this poem and ideas from the Pentateuch onwards, and in this Powell demonstrates imagination and flair. I am not always convinced by the connections she makes. Catherine Pickstock wrote an analysis of this poem which is more substantiated (C. Pickstock, 'What does othering make? David Jones's 'A, A, A Domine Deus', *Religion and Literature*, 2017, pp.167–179)

Nevertheless, Powell is very thorough and detailed in her analysis and makes some interesting and worthwhile points. Of particular note is the connection she makes between Jones's phrase 'for it is easy to miss Him at the turn of a civilisation' and J.R.R. Tolkien's *eucaastrophe* as a final turn in the conclusion of a story that has a quality of joy, a sudden and miraculous joy never to be counted on. Similarly, her exploration of Jones's idea of 'utility' as an absence of creative good is well explained and explored. To all intents and purposes, she does a credible job in this chapter.

In the second chapter, Powell explores a painted inscription, '*Quia per incarnati*'. This work is found in Kettle's Yard, Cambridge. Jones produced this inscription in 1950 to celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. It is a beautiful, luminous inscription that affords the viewer an almost tangible grasp of the Sacramental Sign-Maker that Jones's theology is built on. On the reverse of the inscription, Jones has provided us with an explanation of the work. It is clear from this that the inscription's theology is concerned with the Church's liturgical celebration of the Incarnation and the bi-union nature of God the Father to God the Son ('the Eternal Generation of the Son from the Father'). However, according to Powell, this inscription can be understood as an expression of the Trinitarian nature of God. Her reading of the work is that in order to fully understand it, one needs to read it in the light of the Church's teachings on the Trinity. While she cannot claim that the words are obviously Trinitarian, she suggests that Jones's colouring, division of words (in this inscription for instance, dividing *mysterium*) and the use of angles and curves in the lettering point to a Trinitarian understanding of the work. However, this reading of Jones's lettering as a code for a deeper theological meaning is at odds with Jones's own explanation of his use of colour, shape, and spacing in inscriptions (N.Gray, *The Painted Inscriptions of David Jones*, 1981, p.105). Jones's explanation of his technique in this form of lettering is that it is principally driven by artistic considerations. His painted inscriptions have an organic nature to them so that there is 'an evenly-distributed dark pattern on white

ground'. The colours are chosen because of the letters' relationship with space or the historic provenance of particular words. The shape of words is often prompted by a Latin or Celtic 'feel' to the letters. The division of a word across line breaks is chosen on the basis of what looks right in aesthetic terms. Therefore what Jones writes in his inscriptions is his theology, and in this case he has told us what that theology is: the biune aspect of God not the Trinitarian nature of God. But how he constructs the inscriptions is done in terms of artistic principles and not with theological intent.

In Powell's final chapter, where she looks at the wood engraving 'Bride', she identifies some interesting and thoughtful connections between the engraving and the Church's liturgy. She makes some nice connections between the theology of the divine and the theology of nature. On balance the ideas in this chapter are worthy of serious reflection.

An overarching issue I have with this book is that the leaps Powell makes go a bit too far and her associations are a bit too stretched, so that much of her solid, academically-researched work is lost in my irritation with claims that are too remote from evidential foundation. For instance, using a loose association of ideas she introduces the notions of woods and rivers into 'Bride', even though there is no hint of woodland or of water-courses in the image. Consequently, this book is perhaps better considered as a book for meditation or reflection than as a work of hard-nosed academic scholarship.

Finally, I wonder if it is a mistake to understand David Jones as a theologian. He is essentially an artist-cum-thinker and he does have a theology. But does that make him a theologian? The late Professor Nicholas Lash once said that theologians are grammarians in the language of God. We all have our own theologies, but that does not make us theologians, in the same way that a baker is not a chemist even though he is 'doing' chemistry in his bread-making. In Jones's eyes, an artist performs a sacramental act in creating a work of art, as Powell explains, like a priest administering a sacrament. However, in the act of sacramental sign-making neither artist nor priest is a theologian. So Jones may 'do' theology but that does not make him a theologian.

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