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BOOK REVIEW

Trevor A. Hart and Steven R. Guthrie, eds. *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition* (Ashgate Studies in Theology, Imagination and the Arts. Hampshire/Burlington: Ashgate, 2007). viii + 287 pp. Hdbk. US\$99.95.

The Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts at St. Andrews draws its mission from the inter-disciplinarity of theology. This inherent quality allows deep engagement with various forms of artistic expression, tapping their conceptual vocabularies for metaphors and models valuable for theological inquiry. One promising metaphor is that of *performance*, which functions as the organizing focus for Hart and Guthrie's new book. Originally presented at the Institute's colloquia (2001–2004), these essays now form the fourth installment (and first edited volume) in Ashgate's intriguing series. They share close but subtle connections within each of the book's sections, though the connections grow more tenuous when the sections and their chapters are considered altogether. That said, each contribution is well worth reading on its own merits, and all readers, whether they enter the book from the stage, the academy, or the church, will find their imaginations creatively stretched and strengthened at multiple points. The book suffers from a surfeit of small technical errors, mostly limited to the footnotes, but these do not detract much from the essays' content—or their potential for opening new avenues of discussion. This review addresses each contribution in turn before joining Jeremy Begbie in responding to the collection and assessing the book's impact.

Trevor Hart, who also serves as the series editor along with Begbie and Wheaton's Roger Lundin, provides an introduction wisely devoted not to presenting each essay but to the broader problems they address. Given that much of the history of

engagement between theology and the visual/dramatic arts has been issue-specific, divisive, and reactive (as in the icon-troversy between the Eastern and Western churches) rather than systematic, how can the concept of performance be construed as a valid model for theological investigation? Performance carries a dramaturgical language that can furnish theology with welcome intellectual resources, but the language must be appropriated thoroughly, Hart insists, rather than piecemeal: when Scripture becomes “script,” questions of staging, direction and audience interaction become central to the metaphor (hopefully without becoming strictly allegorical). Hart advances relevant questions posed by postmodernism, implicitly answering Derrida’s deconstructionist deferral of meaning within the confines of the theatrical metaphor, and begins dialoguing with the volume’s correspondents, N. T. Wright and Kevin Vanhoozer among them. The titular paradigm, *faithful* performance, takes center stage as Hart outlines a triad of ecclesial and artistic *tradition*, personal and corporate *identity*, and public presentation and *response*.

Part One, called “Theology, Faith and Theatre,” locates theological applications for dramatic performance as a phenomenon—muddying the conceptual waters slightly, as performance has already been phrased as a metaphor, model and paradigm. The essayists engage Hans Urs von Balthasar and Vanhoozer in critical dialogue, acknowledging the contributions each has made to the discourse of drama and theology (or “theo-drama”), but also refitting these approaches to account for the richness of theatrical metaphor. Ben Quash opens with drama’s role in von Balthasar’s agenda-setting theology of Scripture and the Church. In averring history’s tragic linearity, von Balthasar emphasized the importance of plot and the bittersweet necessity of irretrievable suffering; in affirming the Christian community’s polyphony, he stressed the essentially dialogical nature of drama. The dramatic setting is one Quash prefers over models such as Mikhail Bakhtin’s employment of the novel, even with its unfinalized quality and readily evident surplus of meaning; he finds a diversifying corrective in Vanhoozer’s presentation of Scripture and theology as interwoven conversations. Von Balthasar identifies the cross as a scene of momentous change, calling for

unmitigated response from the “audience,” though his work neglects some of drama’s most revealing practices, such as improvisation—an emphasis revisited in later essays.

Ivan Patricio Khovacs is even more cautious when promoting von Balthasar. Theatre, once applied in theology, cannot then be limited to comparisons in form and style, but must also influence *content*—and, it might be argued, *function* as well. Are theodramatics adequate as a response to revelation? Perhaps so, the author responds, when models such as Vanhoozer’s “apprenticeship” and Shannon Craig-Snell’s “rehearsal” are incorporated: the “text,” constantly re-embodied, demonstrates a plurality of actions and evokes a sense of tension between possibilities already and not-yet realized. Any dramatic representation requires an audience, where its *effect* and *affect* can be measured.

Joshua Edelman likewise argues for deeper mining of dramaturgical resources, moving beyond Vanhoozer’s use of speech-act theory to approaches native to the stage. In the post-Stanislavskian theatre, Bertolt Brecht’s “epic theatre” (didactic, austere, with empathetic appeal toward the “ideal” audience) and David Mamet’s “anti-Method” (instinctive acting, with non-omniscient direction) illustrate the plurality of theatrical traditions and of voices within the theatre of the church. Here and in the two previous essays, scholarly critique of Vanhoozer’s method is welcome, but one might hope for further constructive and even practicable suggestions as alternatives. Still, Edelman exploits the ambiguity of “act” to great effect, draws additional attention to the roles of the audience and the gospel in this drama, and follows Max Harris in seeing the theological analogy of theatre as incarnational in nature.

Part Two traces with considerable disparity the link between Christian discipleship and the “enactment” of identity, surveying the shaping of worship, biblical interpretation, responses to modern media, ethics, and personal identity in light of dramatic finitude. Michael Partridge introduces the section with comments on the “fissiparousness” of religious traditions (e.g. *Christianities*, plural) as contexts that form and inform our “performances,” in that they reflect the diversity of God’s creational design. Partridge’s language is evocative, even beautiful,

though abstract; concrete examples might have complemented his observations, such as when he speaks of performances being trained, or *rehearsed*, as apprenticeships within traditions.

Co-editor Guthrie, in “Temples of the Spirit: Worship as Embodied Performance,” likens cognitive/manipulative development to emotional and spiritual formation: embodied experience is fundamental to balance, as physical movement becomes liturgical. Corporeal language is vitally specific in Scripture, as action reflects attitude. Rather than subduing the body to free the soul, or maintaining suspicion against active worship, Guthrie commends sensory gesture and experience as meaning-making acts within worship, bearing analogies to theological affirmations and marking the body as a significant site of the Spirit’s enabling activity, as in Jesus’ own ministry (Luke 4:18–19). A shared lexicon of motion can be as resource-full for Christian transformation as theology is.

Cardinal Cajetan (1469–1534) demonstrated a pastorally motivated humanism in his biblical scholarship, with such deliberation, argues Michael O’Connor, that his exegesis can be understood as performance. Cajetan’s “dramatic sensitivity” appreciates rhetorical style in Paul and poetics in the psalms, bridging the gap between storyteller and listener by emphasizing the readers’ responsive, performing roles; Cajetan sees the biblical writers as no less active, reflectively editing and relocating their materials with creative, theological purpose. Jolyon Mitchell practices another form of relocation in his essay on *reframing* violence in modern news media. Attempts to “frame” or mediate reality guide his suggestion that participation in Christian narratives, communities, images and practices can facilitate a compassionate accounting of brutal news stories. From a case study in coverage of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, Mitchell turns to the ways in which the New Testament frames the crucifixion, its “central violent event” (p. 145), and related examples of state terrorism like the Slaughter of the Innocents. Community is central to reframing: in the first century and the twenty-first, audiences play decisive parts in choosing how to respond to great anguish.

In approaching ethics, Samuel Wells retrieves the foregoing motifs of improvisation, beginning with concepts of performing a story, and noting their shortcomings (the biblical “script” is unfinished, constantly recreates past acts, and is not universally applicable). Corporate faithfulness *without* scripted reassurance maintains a sense of narrative, but also entails useful games, humor, a relaxed spontaneity, a steady reincorporation of memory and dedicated gifts, and a practiced ability to “over-accept” evil by working around its intrusions into the story. Hart returns to close the section, applying Wells’ emphasis on improvisation to discipleship, which he portrays as a process of forging meaningful relationships in the face of anticipated but unknowable endings. Working from Shakespearean world-stage metaphors, Hart compares Hick, Barth and Moltmann for their views on personal eschatology, concluding with the idea of an improvisational “cadenza” ending that permits hope of repair and closure.

Patrick Sherry opens Part Three, “Artistry as Christian Practice,” with brief thoughts on artworks that prioritize fallenness over beauty, implying a pilgrimage toward redemption, liberation, and recreation. Such pieces communicate at many levels, as expressions of subjective, almost visceral need; as implicitly theological illustrations; and as channels, showing the effects, the cost, and even the deliberate absence of grace. Malcolm Guite enlarges Hart’s Shakespearean focus, recovering truthfulness in playful media by analyzing the plays-within-plays in *The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *Macbeth*. Reason meets imagination, as different ways of knowing, in complementary *apprehension* and *comprehension*; inner aspects of human nature mingle with outer frames of reference, as Prospero’s agents are a part of him (and of Shakespeare); as the *eschaton* threatens with futility and alienation, one abandons this stage-world in hopes of receiving pardon and grace in an eschatological encounter.

William Dyrness seeks the essence of artistic imagination in the Reformation’s visual culture, where the continuing presence of images after initial iconoclasm indicates gradual change in the shaping of the Protestant world. Prints, woodcuts, “literary

monuments” such as Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, architectural and horticultural design, the imaginative restructuring of creedal statements, and the socializing and dramatizing of preaching all served to reflect (and alter) the Reformation’s symbolic universe for leaders and populace alike. Dyrness finds that reimagined faith soon influences (and is in turn influenced by) artistic expression.

The late Rosemary Muir Wright studies the Transfiguration as a case of an artistic tradition in rendering recognizable, biblical events. Transfiguration scenes assist in teaching, assuming familiarity with the story; but such a visionary event had to remain harnessed within church doctrine, lest responses to its representations grow too imaginative. Narrative and theological considerations ensure a reliance on the iconographic tradition’s antecedents. Wright reviews prominent features in Byzantine representations, emphasizing the revelation of divine “energies” rather than essence, and the Western themes of Petrine priority, contemplation (to “see” Christ’s glory as Peter did), and light (conceived alternately as natural radiance and as glory or splendor; especially in Bellini, Raphael, and Fra Angelico). Sieger Köder’s modern rendering appropriates earlier elements, updating the “faithful performance” of the tradition. David Brown’s study of the appropriation of the Ascension in the visual arts functions well as a companion piece; he compares Mary Magdalene’s encounter with the viewer’s experience, stressing both tension and continuity between present and glorified bodies in Giotto, Fra Angelico, Correggio, Titian, Rembrandt, and Dalí. Such tensions, Brown argues, offer the hope of adoption into a better reality.

Responding to the contributors, Begbie hears their proposals in diverse, harmonic resonance, in tune with that of the triune God, continuing a metaphor from Begbie’s own earlier work. Even the reader has a role to play, he notes, in understanding the essays through the lens of performance; thus the book itself functions as performative material. Begbie respects the particular attention given to various artistic practices, and asks for further rigor in analyzing the concrete bases of relevant metaphors and the distinctiveness of interrelated art forms. But

many more questions remain to be asked. Does the book as a whole become a meditative exercise in answering its own performance-related questions? Given the highly visual/dramatic nature of the involved metaphors, would occasional diagrams (perhaps illustrating improvisational “games,” exercises in compassionate “reframing,” or the positional “staging” of biblical and theological propositions: what occurs “behind the scenes”?) not have helped?

Some questions, as Begbie hints, are left to the reader, and to subsequent scholarship: the performance model, at times only implicit here, might inspire other “actors” to more precise engagement with its components. Edelman’s insistence that theological theatre analogies must absorb “those gritty, earthy things that make a script into a play and the Word into flesh: time, space, body, audience, humor, and the creation of meaningful action” (p. 71) affirms the incarnational nature of creative activity in the tradition of Madeleine L’Engle, but it also offers a promising list of analogical applications yet to be explored. This book marks a conversation that has only just begun.

Matthew Forest Lowe
McMaster Divinity College