

Williams, Rowan. *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love*. Harrisburg, Penn.: Morehouse, 2005. 172pp.

Grace and Necessity constitutes the adapted version of the Clark Lectures given by Rowan Williams at Trinity College Cambridge in 2005. Broadly, these lectures reflect the ongoing interest of Williams in exploring the relationship between the practice of art and Christian thought. The entry point into this discussion for Williams is the theological aesthetic of the Roman Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882-1973). In the Introduction, Williams depicts Maritain as a figure largely obscured by historical circumstance. Much of Maritain's work was received in the climate of Vatican II which viewed medieval sources, such as those employed by Maritain, with suspicion. The following chapters attempt to invigorate the perceived lack of scholarly attention regarding his influence on art and aesthetics. The first chapter introduces Maritain's scholastic theology as expressed in his aesthetic. The following two chapters explore the influence of Maritain on the poet/painter David Jones and the novelist Flannery O'Connor. The final chapter includes Williams' own thoughts on how the practice of the arts influence Christian thought.

Distinguishing his contribution from general theories of art criticism, especially as related to the verbal arts, Williams observes that "it is unusual to find sustained reflection on what the process of artistic *composition* entails and what it assumes. . . . theories of art have lately shied away from thinking about exactly what kind of *work* creative composition is, and what kind of reality it claims to show or make" (3). This is programmatic for what follows. As the reader quickly discovers, such language reflects ontological and metaphysical concerns. What does an artist assume about the nature of reality in their work? To answer these questions Williams calls upon Maritain who offered a robust metaphysic of art. Alongside Maritain's metaphysic is the equally, if not doubly, important point that his contribution was actually well received by many practicing artists. Maritain distinguishes art as a function of the practical intellect. Accepting Aquinas' articulation of practical intellect, which is essentially Aristotelian, art is then further understood as an expression of *making* (the production of some specific product in the material) as opposed to an expression *doing* (world the right use of freedom for the sake of human good) (11). This leads to another important claim that art "aims not at the good of humanity but at the good of what is made" (11). Art therefore, should be received in light of its internal integrity as opposed to its relationship to the artist or a particular moral aim.

This distinction of art as production leads to a tension which Williams' generally lucid writing offers little clarity. Williams makes clear that Maritain's concept of beauty assumes the integrity of the thing made, as such, it is viewed a kind of 'good' but not a kind of 'truth'. The reception of this beauty requires the participation of the observer (a fallible human) which renders any judgment potentially deceptive and disallows any moral or metaphysical insight. However, another element of beauty is that its radiance or 'splendour' assumes that the object is there for the observer, but not only for the observer. The object's presence overflows beyond the subject's perception. Art offers itself in excess. Noting that Maritain is not entirely clear on this matter, Williams prods

further stating that “there is also a hint that when we apprehend that something is not there solely for me, that is has an overplus of significance, this very fact has a metaphysical dimension” (13). With this said, Williams assumes that Maritain simply overstated his case about the limited truth-value of art in trying to make other points and in so doing obscures the potential with which art may speak to reality. Williams does acknowledge that Maritain’s thought develops this relationship in its maturity. However, Williams does not outline this movement clearly enough leaving the reader the task of discerning when Williams is employing his own developed thought or remaining within the contribution of Maritain.

Despite some minor points of obscurity Williams does an excellent job making Maritain’s aesthetic accessible and understandable. Focusing on the internal integrity of art, Williams demonstrates how Maritain’s aesthetic guards against undo associations of art with the artist (recalling Maritain’s use of Oscar Wilde who says that a poisoner can write good prose). The *aim* of art also cannot be to *produce beauty* as this detracts attention from the object of art which demands its own integrity. This internal demand for integrity also counters the artist’s ‘will to power’ as the artistic form requires a type of obedience apart from artist’s own agenda. Attending to the integrity work assumes that material forms offer a type of rhythm which “represents the communion between the inner life of the objects of the world and the human self” (23). Artists are called to participate in the patterns of the created order which, significantly, do not always appear on the surface of things. Material forms offer themselves up to become something else. This leads Williams to emphasize what he views as one of Maritain’s most significant phrases which follows that “things are not only what they are [and they] give more than they have” (26). This leads to the observation that artistic form testifies to the gratuity of creation and its potential for facilitating the presence, ultimately, of the sacred. As such, art remains an unfinished business and witnesses to a kind of wounding, limping like Jacob after he wrestled with God.

In the following two chapters Williams demonstrates how the work of Maritain tangibly influenced the work of David Jones and Flannery O’Connor. Here Williams picks up the themes outlined above. For Jones, as a painter, the integrity of his work must resist the urge towards imitation. Imitation as a sole or guiding aim does not respect the integrity of the work in its own right. Jones saw this in the ‘temptation of oils’ which allowed the painter to produce depth and mass. For this reason Jones committed his work to water colors. The thickness of ‘excess’ of the work comes in the overlay lines which all confine themselves to the same surface. Committing himself fully to the reality of two-dimensions Jones adapted Maritain’s view of art as ‘offering more than it is’. This is a particularly sacramental expression for both Maritain and Jones. Reflecting his Catholic theology, Jones likens this to Christ’s flesh which also offers more than it is.

O’Connor, as a novelist, attends to the integrity of her work by monitoring the level that external forces such as a moral agenda intrude upon her narrative. Paradoxically, under the influence of Maritain, O’Connor maintains that moral veracity increases to the extent that it is not intentionally injected into the work. The more the novelist releases his or her characters the more the narrative can re-image a true reality, but one that need not

conform to its audience's perceptions and yet one that the audience still deeply recognizes. Williams notes that the grimness in O'Connor's work reflects this type of commitment. Grace is only discernable in depravity and life best understood by death. Death figures prominently as a means of 'getting somewhere', a powerful aesthetic component testifying to the limits and transcendence of reality. In death something happens, and with it, the potential for change. In these chapters Williams offers readers a clear image of how the theoretical work of Maritain takes form in the artistic labour of Jones and O'Connor with the shared commitment that their chosen media offer themselves gratuitously.

In the final chapter Williams offers his own theological reflections on the contributions of Maritain, Jones, and O'Connor. Here Williams returns to the question of ontology. "What is the world that art takes for granted?" (135). In response, Williams addresses the issue of space and time and their relational nature. Truth is bound to form and knowing unfolds in time. This characterizes the subject's participation in reality. This participation in space and time includes the object's ability to 'give' to all, beyond the individual's possession. Reviewing and developing Maritain's thought, Williams slowly begins to tease out the implications of this project. In contrast to much recent work in theological aesthetics this is where Williams' pastoral sensibilities make his thought more readily accessible to the reading public. At the same time, Williams never compromises his intellectual integrity by trying to force application, and so damage the integrity of his own art. Some of the more significant and relevant contributions in this chapter include the following. Williams demonstrates how this type of aesthetic reacts against the narrowing vision of instrumental thinking which attempts to manipulate data for the purpose of problem solving. Instrumental thinking, he argues, often comes at the cost of excluding that content which does not 'fit'. Williams' critique fits well with those western modern approaches to theology which, at times, viewed the Bible as a storehouse of facts available for the direct application to particular philosophical or moral issues. In this approach the Bible becomes another (non-renewable?) resource to mine for its appropriate ore.

Williams' aesthetic also frees the Christian artist from the constraints and agendas of imposed moralizing. Here a commitment to a vision of God's created order allows artists to explore *all* aspects of life as a potential canvas for God's glory. However, this also places the demands on the artist to reject attempts at aiming for beauty or to deliberately shock. Rather, the artist is to fully obey the felt connections of a work that may not yet have a visible form.

Williams most impacting contribution may come in his commitment to artistic form as providing true and viable alternatives to popular conceptions. The gratuity of form that is stressed throughout this book culminates as a real example of understanding our relationship to the sacred. Williams expresses this in the notion of freedom. He sets this notion of freedom against functional evolution. "The artist's commitment to generative excess in the world stands as a challenge to a vulgarized Darwinism: this life could be otherwise; this life could mean more than its adaptation to these particular circumstances suggests." (156) Williams concludes with a call "to give a little more intellectual house-

room” for the type of theological reflection which takes seriously the work and assumptions of artistic composition.

The great strength of this book lies in its ability to make accessible the type of thought that often remains confined to more philosophically complex works. I am thinking here particularly of the recent book by David Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*. This book is quickly gaining critical recognition, but its philosophical density will limit its potential audience. In addition, Hart’s consistent use of ‘music’ as an appropriate theological metaphor strikes one as contrived and overly abstract compared with the rich material resources that Williams employs. Williams’ book does remain appropriately subtle and nuanced, but its language and flow complements the theological artistry of Williams’ thought and content. Williams achieves his own artistic integrity in a similar way that the novelist Annie Dillard offers her own thoughts on the value of art in *Living by Fiction*.

Another strength of this book is its helpful corrective to George Steiner’s account of the relationship of between art and theology in *Real Presences*. Williams affirms Steiner’s work but claims it does not go far enough. Without denying the great contribution of his work, Steiner allows *Real Presences* to get bogged down under the weight of the ‘artistic genius’ which gets implicitly raised to an almost cult status. Williams’ emphasis, via Maritain, on the integrity of the object demands that this tendency be put in check. This may offer a type of liberation to those artist’s overwhelmed by images of the ‘giants’ of the past.

Few substantial criticisms can be levelled against a work which has the potential to open recent thought on theological aesthetics to such a wide audience. The book is of course brief, and limited in the extent to which any given point can be developed. One area which could have been developed, at least in referring the reader to other works, is how Maritain’s work affected non-Christian or at least non-Catholic artists. Williams alludes to this but leaves the reader with the assumption that this remains a novel or unexplored idea. Another potential weakness comes, paradoxically, from the strength of Williams’ own voice throughout the work. He moves along unflinchingly through Maritain towards what his own thought has developed. The transitions between Maritain’s and Williams’ thought remain vague. In this process one is never quite sure whether Williams has taken Maritain onboard for his own project or whether Williams allows Maritain to maintain a distinct voice. These observations are minor and pale in comparison to the wealth of insight which this work provides for both theologian and artist.