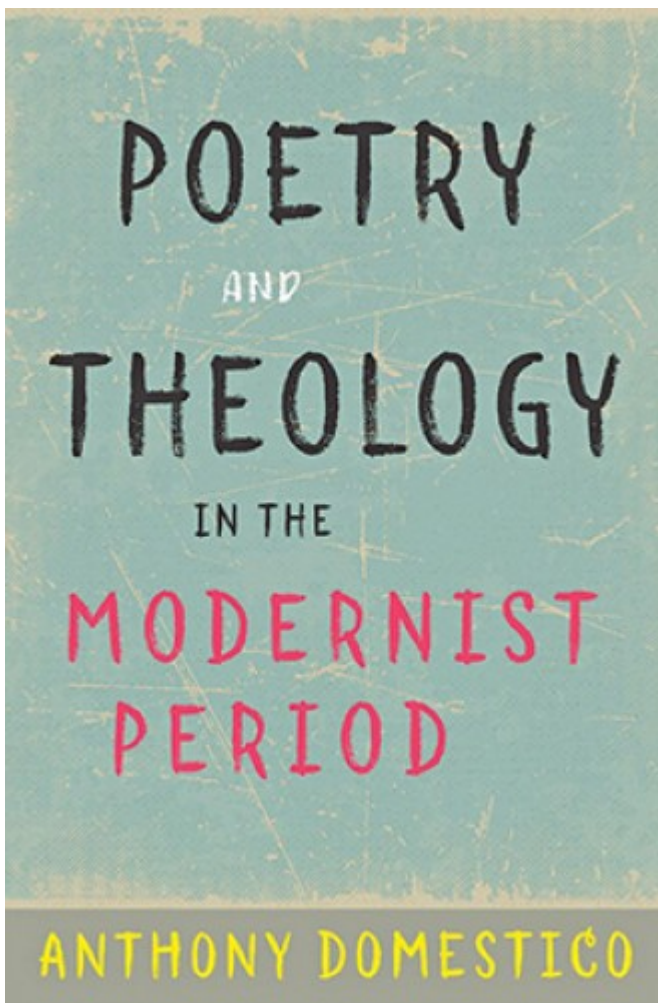


The value of God-shaped art

T. S. Eliot and the other modernist theologian-poets knew that artists are makers of worlds.

by [Ralph C. Wood](#) in the [November 7, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Poetry and Theology in the Modernist Period

By Anthony Domestico
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In 1950, the *Partisan Review* canvassed major American poets and intellectuals—W. H. Auden, Marianne Moore, and Hannah Arendt among them—to determine why there was an increasing disfavor toward secular and atheist attitudes about religion. Now the question would have to be asked the other way around: Why the reflexive favor given to unbelief in the high places of our culture? Anthony Domestico undertakes to explain this anomaly.

The conventional answer is that modern religion and culture gradually reaped the hurricane first stirred up by Friedrich Schleiermacher, fanned by Matthew Arnold, and making landfall in Williams James (though John Henry Newman sought lonely refuge against the storm). These “liberals,” as Newman called them, welcomed the coming of a Christianity that would be embraced not for its liturgical worship and doctrinal claims so much as for its power to prompt salutary religious experience and laudable ethical reform. Christianity was thus folded into personal spirituality or social justice, leaving little difference between the scandalous particularity of the gospel and its salutary by-products. For a time, only troglodyte secularists bothered to deny this progressive arc of history.

Domestico makes the counterclaim that, from the early 1930s through the early 1960s, there were modernist Christian poets and theologians whose work rightly dominated the cultural scene. The leader of this fertile intersection of religion and the arts was T. S. Eliot. From 1922 to 1939, he edited the *Criterion*, the leading British intellectual journal of the time. Though devoted primarily to literature, it also featured major Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox theologians: Jacques Maritain and Martin D’Arcy, Karl Barth and William Temple, as well as Sergius Bulgakov.

Theology, Eliot felt, was not meant to remain silently in the background of poetic creation but rather to generate and sustain it. Far from being moribund, Eliot believed that modernist Christianity should serve as the basis for modernist art. Domestico argues for the Anglo-Welsh poet David Jones’s deep dependence on the French Jesuit theologian Maurice de la Taille; Auden’s profound indebtedness to Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Søren Kierkegaard; and (most counterintuitively) Eliot’s own kinship with Barth.

Modernism was born in the era immediately following World War I, when many thinkers and artists became convinced that Victorian moralism and optimism were irremediably bankrupt and a new order must be born. They searched for radically

new and often experimental modes of expression to embody this seismic shift in sensibility. James Joyce and William Faulkner, for example, abandoned chronological narrative continuity and objective authorial point of view. Ignoring orderly sentence structure and dialogue, their fiction incorporates fragments of thought to capture the flooding stream of their characters' mental processes, requiring the reader's onerous but worthy participation in it.

Modernist poetry is equally complex, difficult, and allusive. It resists bringing things to rounded conclusions—not in despair that there are no such conclusions, but because the universe is so radically significant that it breaks the boundaries of our best attempts to inhabit its myriad likenesses and unlikenesses. Like dogma, the material world is the mystery that invites our inexhaustibly creative participation in it.

Domestico demonstrates that modernists were united in critiquing older notions of art as *mimesis*. The theological work prompting this revolution was Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism* (1920). Maritain maintained that "art, as such, does not consist in imitating but in making, in composing or constructing, in accordance with the laws of the very object to be posited in being." Art is not a didactic tool, a container for the expression of ideas, but a creation of the perfect form for the created object. Craft and technique triumph over message and theme. There is no meaning separable from the artwork itself. Like God's own act of creation, art is gratuitous and intransitive, an act rather than an end, a process rather than a product, a finding rather than a seeking, as Picasso said.

Although his chapters on Eliot and Auden are worthwhile, Domestico's treatment of Jones is most crucial. "Art has no end save the perfecting of the process by which all sorts of ends are made possible," Jones wrote in his 1955 essay "Art and Sacrament": "In so far as art has an end that end is a 'fitting together' and the word 'art' means a fitting together." Poetic words are not meant to *refer* so much as to *enact*, not to *present* but to *re-present*, to generate something strange and other by virtue of their very utterance. Domestico paraphrases Jones: "*The Wasteland* is not a poem about modern despair and futility, . . . it *is* modern despair and futility under the form of poetry" (emphasis added).

No wonder that the word *sacrament* becomes definitive for these Christian modernists. In the Eucharist the sacramental "sign" and the "thing signified" become perfectly united and efficacious. Jones likens the eucharistic words of

institution to a military command. To give an order such as “come” is to bring about the very action. The poet is thus called to be a virtual priest or “co-worker with God” (2 Cor. 6:1). The artist, Jones asserts once more, “is as it were an associate of God in the making of beautiful works; by developing the powers placed in him by the Creator . . . and by making use of created matter, he creates, so to speak, at second remove.”

“Beautiful” does not mean “pretty,” and its opposite is not “ugly.” Instead, there are greater and lesser, more and less fitting acts of making. Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece* is a “beautiful” work of art because the gnarled fingers of Christ at once cry out his total abandonment by God and his equally agonizing committal of his life into God’s hands. Heinrich Hofmann’s *Christ in Gethsemane*, by contrast, is “pretty” but ill-made because Jesus’ moon-lightened face and neatly folded hands suppress any marks of suffering. The chief task, for artist and audience alike, is to determine what is essential and what is superfluous. Here the aesthetic and the moral are joined. A well-made work of art about a gruesome event such as the Crucifixion is likely to prompt a more authentic discipleship than would a badly wrought depiction of a similar scene.

These are matters that bear not only on the vocation of writers, painters, sculptors, and architects. The fundamental activity for all human beings is poesis. G. K. Chesterton made similar claims during these early modernist years: “Art is the signature of man,” he declared in *The Everlasting Man* (1925). Everyone is a poet insofar as they make things whose beauty lies in the irreducible welding of form and matter for their own sake—apart from or at least beyond their practicality. We human makers can discern that a honeycomb is a beautifully made hexagonal and prismatic thing. Yet so far as we can tell, bees do not behold it as comely; they create their combs instinctively for use rather than freely for beauty. J. R. R. Tolkien was similarly convinced that the act of making—the creation of lovely things that have no necessary utilitarian value—is our distinctive human activity: “We make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker” (*The Monsters and the Critics*, 1936).

Though Domestico believes that Christian modernism had a short life span of roughly four decades and is unlikely ever to recur, I believe that its relevance remains. We are inundated with creations, religious and secular alike, that are devoted almost completely to subartistic self-expression or ideology. The modernists

can still teach us how to stay afloat in such a deluge. They serve as salutary reminders that there are no shortcuts to finding what is fitting and whole, whether in art or life. Willy-nilly, we are all engaged in the creative making of our lives so as to participate, well or ill, in God's good creation.

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