Images of Redemption: Art, Literature and Salvation

David Brown

To cite this article: David Brown (2004) Images of Redemption: Art, Literature and Salvation, Ars Disputandi, 4:1, 112-113, DOI: 10.1080/15665399.2004.10819825

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15665399.2004.10819825

© 2004 The Author(s). Published by Taylor & Francis.

Published online: 06 May 2014.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 146

View related articles
Images of Redemption: Art, Literature and Salvation

By Patrick Sherry


[1] Over the years Patrick Sherry (who has recently retired from Lancaster University) has done much to enrich our understanding of the kind of contribution novels and poetry can make to theology. Here music and art also find a role as he explores the relevance of the arts generally to the theme of redemption. Seen as a three-stage drama (past, present and future), the sheer number of accompanying examples means that few are explored in detail. Nonetheless, almost every reader is bound to find some that will act as a spur towards further reflection.

[2] However, it is probably on the overall thrust of Sherry’s argument that most attention will focus. Here there seem to be three obvious areas of potential disagreement. The first occurs with the opening chapter where Sherry insists against Dixon, Forsyth and Simon that properly Christian art need not only be redemptive. The creation too speaks of God, and so Haydn’s work of the same name, for example, can equally well be so described. Here I am wholly with Sherry. The gospel becomes all the more powerful precisely because something worth saving (in the sense of preserving) is seen to exist. Secondly, Sherry insists that the arts can in their own right be revelatory and so not only be the subject of Christian critique but also offer a legitimate critique in their turn. For example, Ibsen’s Brand makes us rethink in one direction regarding any demand for inflexible loyalty towards God, while some of Graham Greene’s novels make us rethink in another, since their plots no longer work without the reality of hell. One might seek to weaken Sherry’s claim by suggesting that all he really seems to have in mind are particular forms of theological interpretation rather than the Scriptures as such, but of course one person’s ‘interpretation’ can be what another sees as the meaning of the text itself. Deep issues are clearly being raised here about how the meaning of the Scriptures is in fact generated for the reader. Inevitably, it would seem, all the others things we read, including novels, will help condition our expectations of what the biblical text might acceptably be taken to mean.

[3] If on those two issues, I am at one with Sherry, I am much less happy with his description of much visual art in particular as ‘illustrative.’ He insists that this is not intended as a dismissive term. The illustrative can also be illuminating. But I wonder if ever great art is merely illustrative or illuminating. Does the good artist not almost invariably take us one stage beyond the text, and so invite further
avenues for exploration that are not as such given in the text itself? Michelangelo in making the Virgin Mary the same age as her son in his Vatican Pietà can scarcely be said to have left the biblical narrative as it is. That may be a startling case, but all artists, I suggest, aim to puzzle just a little, precisely as a way of engaging us that bit more with the significance of the narrative or whatever else it is they are seeking to represent visually.