



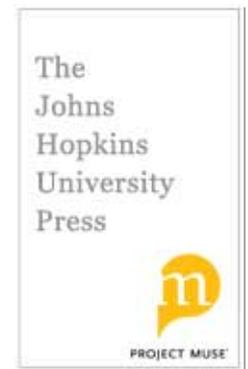
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*Christianity and Literature: Philosophical Foundations and
Critical Practice* by David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet
(review)

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Christianity and Literature: Philosophical Foundations and Critical Practice.
By David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011. ISBN 978-0-8308-2817-3. Pp. 336. \$24.00.

Literary scholars both aspiring and accomplished will look with gratitude to this straightforward and learned presentation of the Christian humanist tradition in the West as it bears upon the study of English literature. As part of the InterVarsity Press Christian Worldview Integration Series, it is clearly meant primarily to benefit Christian students and scholars who refuse to dismiss their religious convictions from their academic work. However, the book deserves a wider audience than this. Scholars of all persuasions will find here both a worthy statement of a historically central tradition and a challenge to current assumptions from authors conversant in recent theoretical debates. In a number of ways, *Christianity and Literature* will remind readers of C. S. Lewis' work, particularly *The Abolition of Man*. The volume by Jeffrey and Maillet represents the philosophically turned reflections of serious Christian scholars of English literature on what they take to be the baneful direction of contemporary education. Indeed, readers of *The Abolition of Man* may remember that Lewis' first extended example has to do with Coleridge's remarks on a waterfall and whether the sublime is a mere feeling confined to human consciousness. And yet the current volume is more capacious than Lewis' essay, providing a kind of snapshot history of English (and American) literature in its "practical" chapters. In this sense, the book more nearly resembles Lewis' *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*. David Lyle Jeffrey has certainly reached the point in his career where he has earned the right to author a book of magisterial sweep. Readers of this journal will recognize Jeffrey as the recipient of the Conference on Christianity and Literature's Lifetime Achievement Award. I was put in mind of his award-winning *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (1996), in which he treats some of the same issues for a more advanced target audience. Here, in concert with Gregory Maillet, his younger Roman Catholic co-author, he cultivates a style that is confident and clear without being contentious. The pairing of Protestant with Catholic has an intentional ecumenical message, as the Authors' Preface declares: the book is meant to present a kind of "mere" Christian consensus on foundational matters.

Part one of the three-part organizational scheme of the book is thus unsurprisingly titled "Christian Foundations." Jeffrey and Maillet insist that the type of theory appropriate and indeed necessary for Christians is a correspondence theory of truth with its built-in metaphysical realism. When we say something is true, we mean and must mean that our statement corresponds with a state of affairs external to our thought. With its strong insistence on a creator-savior God who stands over against the world, the Bible assumes that human truth and truthfulness are measured by the degree to which they reflect the divine originator and sustainer. The authors illustrate the philosophical point with Paul's succinct assessment of the

importance of Jesus' resurrection: If Christ has not been raised, our faith is in vain (I Cor. 15:14). Closely related to the point about truth is one concerning beauty. Beauty, insist the authors, must from a Christian point of view be considered an objective quality rather than a subjective judgment, as Kant, for example, argued. Beauty is a feature of God also found in God's creation, and it is one we may either discover or fail to discern. It is what makes all the arts serious business, so to speak. Beauty bereft of ontological status lapses into a mere psychological category. If beauty is not real in the metaphysical sense, then to call something beautiful is to do no more than express an emotion. For Jeffrey and Maillet, asserting the objective reality of truth and beauty is so theologically important, that the other two types of truth theory—coherence and pragmatic—must be rejected despite their powerful modern proponents.

In the remainder of part one, the authors describe and carry out a Christian philosophy of literature (a theological aesthetics) rooted in theistic realism. This is not so esoteric an exercise as it may sound. The authors make the persuasive case that art in general, and literature in particular, gives us access to the good, the true, and the beautiful. Thus it is an important task to develop the skills to discern these transcendentals. Since Christian revelation is so deeply textual, rooted as it is in Scripture, literary criticism becomes an inescapable task. Appropriately, Jeffrey and Maillet close this section with a chapter on "our literary Bible," calling attention to formal features that must be recognized in order to achieve any level of understanding. One of the benefits of this section is to demonstrate that the Bible can be approached in a genuinely scholarly way that does no violence to the coherence one must find in it if it is to serve as the church's guide for worship and faith.

Part two is the first of two sections on literary history, and it discusses what might be called the literature of English Christendom. After a preliminary consideration of Augustine's theory of reading, chapter four moves us forward to the pageant plays of the Corpus Christi Cycle and the narrative poem *Pearl*. The following chapter, on Renaissance literature, features some of the best known names in the English canon. The section on Milton is memorable, especially for its defense of Milton against the charge that he hubristically over-reached his theological brief by attempting to supplement Scripture with his own poetry. With equal unassuming ambition, our authors take on Shakespeare, making the case that he can be read as a Christian dramatist of an orthodox cast. The chapter on the eighteenth century is more compressed, but manages to place Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson in the long line of Christian humanists. We are also reminded of the impact of the Dissenters from whom North American Evangelicals trace their ancestry on the poetry of William Cowper and William Blake.

The final major division of the book brings us from the nineteenth century to the present and includes a chapter on literary theory. The chapter on the nineteenth century and Romanticism is most acute in its treatment of Wordsworth, bearing

out M. H. Abrams' point that Romanticism sought to relocate religious authority to a certain kind of poetic experience of nature. Although literature in this period reflected serious doubt concerning the validity of traditional Christianity, this was not an anti-religious age, as the impulse to treat literature as religion attests. The story takes a turning as the authors bring us to our own time. By the twentieth century one is likely to encounter an atheism that shows us either a bleak world indifferent to human concerns or a universe in which endlessly playful self-creation is the only heroic option. According to Jeffrey and Maillet, the later Hemingway is an example of the first alternative and Joyce of the second. But they also point to counter examples. Just as the Victorians produced Hopkins as well as Arnold, so the twentieth century had its Tolkien and O'Connor.

The attitudes of modernism and postmodernism affect literary theory no less than literature. In their final chapter, the authors show how intellectual currents have shaped the discipline of literary study. Noting that the deep philosophical skepticism associated with deconstruction and some forms of semiotics undermined the very notions of literature and criticism, Jeffrey and Maillet call attention to those theorists who seek a new basis for finding in literature a conduit of wisdom. The authors believe that at this point in the argument, Christians are at an advantage, for they can assert both the divine transcendence which historically has given literature its cultural authority and the modesty which forbids making an idol of artistic achievement. Even as a minority at odds with the assumptions of academic culture, Christian scholars may and should make a contribution, as an act of neighbor love.

This volume has many virtues, coherence and compactness among them. In addition to the sustained historical narrative, one finds in the selected bibliographies at the end of each chapter a brief but representative list of secondary works, which were clearly not selected according to some standard of an Authorized Version of criticism. Yet, both as a pedagogical instrument and as an argument the book has limitations. It would be difficult to use this volume as the primary textbook in a theory course because so many of the chapters are devoted to the literature of a certain era. The "history" chapters are too brief, however, to serve as introductions in a more specialized course—Victorian literature, for example. For classroom use, I think the book would work best as a supplemental text in a theory course, where it could be used to contextualize the historically arranged anthologies that commonly supply basic readings for such a course.

Although elegantly written and generally persuasive, the argument of the book sometimes borders on the schematic. For example, although epistemological realism and a correspondence theory of truth have indeed been central to historic Christian theology, an unqualified insistence upon them not only obscures parts of the tradition, it can easily give the appearance of a kind of intellectual triumphalism that makes many critics of the church suspicious. Although Christians have certainly insisted that through worship, word, and sacrament the God of Jesus Christ may

be truly known, the tradition also recognizes barriers to complete knowledge. Even in scholastic realism, language of God is said to be analogical rather than univocal in order to acknowledge the limitations and fallibility of human reason. Similarly, the apophatic tradition takes recognition of the ultimate unknowability of God as its basic insight. The problem with a bald declaration of Christian correspondence theory of truth in our historical context is that it can easily sound like an embrace of the kind of Enlightenment foundationalism that, ironically, has sponsored both secular modernism and religious fundamentalism. Christians need a more chastened epistemological certainty—one that insists on the possibility (and actuality!) of genuine knowledge, but that also recognizes human knowledge as historically conditioned and incomplete.

The limitations of the sections on particular eras and authors are predictable and understandable. One sympathizes with scholars painting in broad strokes that forbid subtlety. But at times, the authors seem to leave a misimpression by framing writers in Christian terms. For example, although it is true that no proof exists that Shakespeare was bisexual, to say in a brief discussion of the sonnets that those poems addressed to the young man encourage him to marry and are often aimed at a more general audience than the single recipient at the very least leaves out a number of relevant matters. The sonneteer clearly seems preoccupied with the physical beauty of the young man, for example, and Sonnet 20 seems on the face of it to indicate a sexual interest. Although these matters remain controverted and the conclusions of Jeffrey and Maillet are sensible, the case is not so clear-cut as they make it out to be. Similarly, in the final chapter, which brings us to our own period and so covers ground where no consensus on a literary canon exists, some of the choices seem idiosyncratic. Still, in a contentious academic atmosphere in which a coherent, intelligent Christian vision is often assumed to be a relic of the past, this volume offers compelling counter-evidence.

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Donne's Augustine: Renaissance Cultures of Interpretation. By Katrin Ettenhuber. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. ISBN 978-0-19-960910-9. Pp. xii + 267. \$110.00.

According to the notorious and at times dubious Izaak Walton, Donne's first and most influential biographer, Donne was a second Augustine, and there can be no doubt of the profound influence that certain key works such as the *Confessions* and *The City of God* exerted over the formation of Donne's intellect. In *Donne's Augustine*, Katrin Ettenhuber has produced an important book for which students of