APOCALYPTIC BEAUTY: GOD'S PRIORITY AND THE ONTOLOGY OF THE FUTURE

Stephen John Wright

This article has been peer reviewed.

This article engages the work of American Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson to argue that creaturely experiences of beauty are as revelations from the Spirit of a future beauty of restored life in God through Christ. This is not to assign ontic status to a simple futurity, but it raises the question of the complex nature of time itself. Time is not a simple line stretching eternally forwards, but the real future falls within the infinite embrace of God's triune life. Freedom, then, is predicated on the liberating beauty of the triune being. Where Jenson's account tends towards a unilateral act of beauty upon the creature, I propose a Wesleyan corrective through prevenient grace to restore reciprocity to the aesthetic event. The relation of the present to the future need not be determinative or causal; rather, it is an aesthetic invitation.

Introduction

To begin, a quote on openness: 'The task posed to theology is how to…narrate the future without closing it, how to narrate a…story of the future as a story of how the future is open and unpredictable.'[1] A community of theologians has gathered around this task, and has made its aim the declaration of God's openness to the future and the revisions this inflicts on classical doctrines. Many in this *koinonia* identify as Wesleyan in theology, committed to the rolling back of divine intrusion on human freedom to make room for love. This project entails one of the group's more controversial revisions: the shearing of content from the future, even in the mind of God, to allow for a free and unpredictable future. However, the above quote does not come from an open theist, but an American Lutheran Robert Jenson.

Jenson has spent his prestigious theological career thinking about God and the future. After publishing his doctoral thesis on

---

[1] R. W. Jenson, *God after God: The God of the Past and the God of the Future, Seen in the Work of Karl Barth* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 62.

Barth's doctrine of election, Jenson turned to critique Western theology (Barth included) for locking up God in a changeless past. Jenson sought to find a way to describe God's relation to a radically unwieldy future.

In this paper I will pose a question of beauty, and consider where it leads us in our understanding of the future and God's relation to it. Jenson's theological musings on beauty lead to some interesting conclusions about the true location of beauty. In the case of creaturely beauty, it is already present, and not yet complete. Created beauty is, in some sense, realised eschatology. But its appearance as such in Jenson's thought tends towards unilateral divine action. In order to restore some reciprocity to beauty I propose that we interpret Jenson's thoughts through a Wesleyan doctrine of prevenience, all the while asking some big questions of time and the future.

In Whose Eye?

Since the rise of empirical philosophy, the West has relativised all claims to aesthetic apprehension by appeals to subjectivity. Hume explicitly removed beauty from the object and placed it within the subject, and Kant famously rehearsed this move and attempted to develop a 'subjective universality.'[2] Since Hume, it seems, there has been no accounting for taste. And this appears to be confirmed by experience. Pedestrian aesthetes know that beauty is to be found nowhere but 'in the eye of the beholder'.

Undoubtedly, even the most closely aligned personal tastes will differ at one point or another. We may agree on which film to see together, but have a vigorous argument about where to eat beforehand. My own faculties of perception are not normative for all subjects. There are many eyes belonging to many beholders – just as there are many ears, tongues, nostrils, and hands – and so there is a plurality of competing perceptions. Any judgement rendered by these multitudinous organs can be no more than arbitrary, an evacuation of any perceived meaning of the word 'beauty'.

Attempts at consensus merely exacerbate the problem. It is not at all clear how a majority judgement of the beauty of, say, Federation Square in Melbourne at all alleviates the claim of arbitrariness. Dissenting judgements remain, and those who assent do so for differing reasons. That this particular location has come to be

[2] I. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.H. Bernard (Mineola, NY: 2005), 34.

accepted by many as beautiful after a period of disapproval merely increases the suspicion of nihilism. Any such beauty is clearly not readily apparent if it must be worked out over time among a community. Our combined perceptions are 'but a mutual impingement of arbitrary instances.'[3]

However, we are only dissatisfied with the apparent lack of an objectively recognisable beauty when we are looking for beauty as a particular quality. What if beauty is rather an event, the happening of God's creative activity in the world? In this case, judgements will indeed become more complex. Beauty functions also as a verb, mystifying the relation of subject and object. The object of beauty is no longer the thing in which we imagine beauty to inhere, but that upon which beauty acts as a free and untamable occurrence.

As a witness to the occasion of beauty, I do not have any claim on the beauty proper to the object of my attention. My willing cannot make a thing beautiful, nor can my glance endow it with meaning. Beauty rather acts upon me. It enraptures, enthralls, captivates, and unnerves. In the event of beauty, I am the object seized upon. To be the object of beauty is to undergo the transgression of this act. As the object in this action I can lay no claim on beauty. I cannot chase it down, tame it, or demand its appearance.

I may wish to share my apprehension of beauty with another, but is such a gesture possible? Could there be a 'subjective universality' – as Kant imagined – that allows subjects to share in the apprehension of a thing as beautiful? It may be that I believe that my eye performs the task of unifying and harmonising objects into aesthetic ripeness, that my ear extends beyond my form to order and conduct the voices of the world into a mellifluous whole. But if beauty is the event of God's work in Jesus, this is to indulge in some kind of aesthetic Pelagianism. Or, at best, it would be a reflexive action in which I find beauty in my own apprehension of beauty. If beauty is grounded in the divine life, if it is the rich and endlessly developing harmony of the mutual triune being, then I cannot be the subject when encountering it. Beauty overtakes me. It goes before and makes a home where I could not place it. It touches the unclean and reveals a wholeness that no human effort could accomplish.

If we are the objects of beauty, apprehended and arrested by its wild freedom, then the 'eye of the beholder' in which the aphorism locates beauty cannot be ours. Just so Jenson speculates that 'what I

[3] R. W. Jenson, 'Beauty,' in *Essays in Theology of Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 150.

find beautiful is beautiful antecedent to my finding, because it is beautiful in the eyes of God.'[4] It is the gaze of God alone which has the capacity to fix in objects the beauty seen there. God's relation to an object is not that of a passive mind which gathers information but leaves the object untouched, but God intrudes on objects transformingly as spirit.

In his later career Jenson has produced two biblical commentaries, one on Ezekiel and one on the Song of Songs. Jenson's commentary of Song of Songs upholds the tradition of a 'spiritual reading' of the romantic discourse of the lovers. The book is, Jenson says, 'sexy poetry about the Lord.'[5] Throughout the song there are adulations of mutual beauty between the two lovers. The strangeness of this pattern is that it means 'the Lord tells Israel she is sheerly beautiful.'[6] But throughout the scriptures we know that God's love is given to us in spite of our sinfulness. We are not deserving of grace, but we are yet ugly in our sin. John Wesley saw that sinful ruin is the necessary precondition of salvation: 'is there any need of being worse, in order to be accepted? Art thou not bad enough already?'[7] Is God, then, mistaken in calling such creatures 'beautiful'?

The question of subjectivity thus fades, and is replaced with another just as perplexing: how is anything beautiful at all? The second glance can rob an object of its beauty. Is it that all beauties are phantoms perceptible only by the corners of our eyes, disintegrating with a direct gaze? Jenson draws an analogy with the doctrine of justification, which cannot be merely forensic or God would be declaring that we are what we all too plainly are not. We are justified by God's declaration of our justification, and also we are 'beautified by God's sheer declaration, 'you are beautiful'.'[8] God speaks beauty into us.

It is the doctrine of the Trinity – as is almost always the case with Jenson – which is the key to unlocking this insight. 'My eye or ear cannot found *in* the thing it sees the beauty it sees there, cannot ground judgements of beauty that are not arbitrary, because I am only one.'[9] The word by which God called forth all being is the same

[4] Jenson, 'Beauty,' 148.
[5] R. W. Jenson, *Song of Songs* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2005), 7.
[6] Jenson, *Song of Songs*, 45.
[7] J. Wesley, 'The Way to the Kingdom,' *Forty-Four Sermons* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1944), 72.
[8] Jenson, *Song of Songs*, 45.
[9] Jenson, 'Beauty,' 149.

as that which enunciates that most articulate aesthetic judgement: 'you are beautiful.' Because this word is not distinct from God, but is God all over again – light from light, true God from true God – the act of declaration and the declaration itself are both God's act upon creation.

Every creaturely being arises from discourse, formed on the lips of the triune God. Creaturely beauty is limned by the voice of God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the only universal subjectivity theology can allow. It is not a subjectivity that is worked out among creatures, but which goes ahead of us. Every syllable of the divine Word spoken by the Father is aspirated; the Word comes upon creation with the interfering freedom of the Spirit. The morning frost is beautiful, not because I see it as such, but because God has gone ahead of me and beautified it by his judgement.

To say that God makes ugly things beautiful – that the Father can take the wreck of this world and all our palsied gestures of prayer as the media of his art – is to say that he knows them through the Son in the freedom of the Spirit; he draws them into the harmony of the triune life. We do not yet find ourselves quite embraced in this way. No large amount of introspection is required to place our beauty in doubt. Every beauty is an intrusion on our otherwise graceless existence.

How, then, do our judgements figure into this? If beauty is universally grounded in divine judgement, how is it that you and I will fall out over Bach or punk? In part the answer lies in the fact that we are attempting to describe a beauty which has not yet fully arrived. Because the only subjectivity which can place beauty in an object is divine, all our judgements of beauty must be epilogues, a speaking after God in an attempt to catch up with the revelation of beauty appearing before us. Our perceptions of beauty are not just the reverberations of a now fading voice spoken in the distant past, but the sound is just before us, words spoken moments ahead.

What we are hearing is the harmony known only in the end. Judgements of beauty rarely hold up to close scrutiny. They appear as arbitrary because beauty has the objectivity of an event; it is easy to miss. It is entirely beyond our control. Beauty is something God works upon us in the freedom of the Spirit. Our hearing it or seeing it at all is a revelation, a sheer miracle. Beauty is fixed with surety only in the future: the final abundance of harmony and terrifying splendour of the new creation. The richness of this future bleeds into

the past and ensnares us.

Realised Eschatology

The word spoken by which God beautifies creation is the Son, the second one of God. It is the gospel that beautifies. The lovely renderings of the ministry, passion, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth spoken by the Father in the freedom of the Spirit cause beauty to bloom. Beauty, as given by God, is always a word of the past. Is it then locked into a static realm of fixed history? Jenson charges that natural religion has often attempted to lock God into an unchangeable past, understanding divine being solely in terms of protology. But by his resurrection Jesus cannot be locked away in the past, his life is an event that we must 'remember *and* await.'[10] It is both a word of the past and of the future. God, thus, bears the poles of time internally. God is always behind and before, always calling us forward in faithfulness to a past event.

Jenson translates Kant's musings on the meeting of the actual and the ideal in beauty into theological parlance: 'beauty is realized eschatology, the present glow of the sheer goodness that will be at the end.'[11] The apparently serendipitous joining of the present reality with the final *telos* is given as God speaks final beauty. Again with the Song of Songs: 'the Lord's vision of his people is eschatological…the Lord's wondrous bride is the Israel he is *bringing* to beauty.'[12]

At present our experiences of beauty are fleeting and fugitive, rushing past us like a ball thrown too fast to catch. The aesthetic moment passes and all too often we find it to be entirely unrepeatable. The film fails to moves us on subsequent viewing; the prior perspicuity of the poem is clouded by dense syntax; the knotted tree which previously thrilled is now sadly decrepit. Where is the prior surprising depth of plot, the astonishing simplicity of prose, the graceful gestures of the bough?

Catholic thought has often aligned created beauty with the beatific vision, with our destiny of 'sharing God's vision of and delight in God's beauty.'[13] Attempting to uncover a uniquely Protestant aesthetics, William Dyrness observes the consistent

[10] Jenson, *God after God*, 130. Emphasis added.
[11] Jenson, *Song of Songs*, 46.
[12] Jenson, *Song of Songs*, 74. Emphasis in original.
[13] J. Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 38.

practice of locating the fullness of beauty in the future: 'Beauty is from God, but its reference is not above, but ahead.'[14] Beauty thus has a prophetic character, revealing a harmony not yet present. The sharp edge of beauty is this prophetic protest against the violence and ugliness of the present order. God works beauty on creation purgatively, judging and redeeming through the Word that is Jesus.

Jenson's fellow Lutheran, Eberhard Jüngel, articulates a vision of beauty as an apocalyptic interruption. Beauty disrupts the framework of reality by 'denying it the right to be the final and true reality, the beautiful gives reference to a future, to a future which makes whole.'[15] The beautiful, for Jüngel, is the pre-appearance of truth. By this logic he accounts for the evanescence of beauty, it must die to make way for truth. This is not a denial of beauty, but anticipates the time when 'truth and beauty will be identical.'[16]

Precisely as interruption, the future never follows naturally from what has gone before it. Beauty is not the inevitable culmination of the progress of history; rather God poses a beautiful future. 'If we hope, we do not see the present as the basis of life, needing only to be protected. A true future is not merely the goal of a teleologically conceived world-process.'[17] Jüngel's future truth revealed now as beauty, then, must be the intrusive and transformative truth of the gospel: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The beauty bestowed upon creation at the eschaton is not now translated from event to quality, but is the ongoing and unending event of participation in the life of Father, Son, and Spirit by participation in the resurrection of Jesus. Beauty never ceases to be lively and free in its relation to the future. In a new creation of perfected love it always enraptures and surprises with the freedom that only the Spirit can bring.

Some decades ago, Jenson argued that things are beautiful before we perceive them so because they are 'first beautiful in the eye of God, who *somehow* shares his perception.'[18] But of that 'somehow,' Jenson had little to say. If the life of Jesus is the form of beauty and creatures have beauty by their variable participation in this life and

---

[14] W. A. Dyrness, *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2010), 180.
[15] E. Jüngel, 'Even the Beautiful Must Die – Beauty in the Light of Truth. Theological Observation on the Aesthetic Relation,' in *Theological Essays II*, ed. and trans. J. B. Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 64-65.
[16] Jüngel, 'Even the Beautiful Must Die,' 81.
[17] Jenson, *God after God*, 165.
[18] Jenson, 'Beauty,' 148. Emphasis added.

its future, might glimpses of creaturely beauty be visions of a future harmony? Is it that they come upon us as unexpectedly as the frightful visions accorded an exile on Patmos? Just as the disciples witnessed their risen Lord in his future glory, a glory we now await, beauty is, perhaps, a blinding manifestation of our final life in God.

This is all to suggest that the beauties of this world are not something we can make, as Kant and many others have observed. No amount of exertion can construct the beautiful; no incantation can conjure it. It was Maritain's conviction that art tends towards beauty, but the 'production of beauty cannot be a goal for the artist' without compromising the thing made.[19] The appearance of beauty is a felicitous miracle that God works upon us.

This is not a miracle reserved for the faithful, but given to all people of all faiths or of no faith at all. Lutherans, like Jenson, will understand such an audacious claim by the distinction of 'gospel' and 'law'; those who do not hear God's beautifying Word as gospel 'hear it nonetheless as law.'[20] But Jenson's view of beauty, so far explained, tends towards the unilateral. That is, aesthetically, it tends towards the sheer ineffable wall of the sublime before which we have no recourse. Beauty is a gift, but a gift which we cannot refuse or place on the shelf. This ventures close to the graveyard of beauty and difference, where the throne of the sublime is situated. John Milbank observes that 'to defend beauty against the sublime…is also to defend reciprocity against the unilateral.'[21] Is not beauty both a gift and an invitation? Does it not capture us because we desire it and want to be caught? Jenson's early thought is lacking this reciprocity. I believe that introducing some Wesleyan insights will prove a much needed corrective for Jenson's theology.

Time and Prevenience

John Wesley had an answer for how we know any good or beauty at all: the universality of God's prevenient grace. Prevenient grace is a multi-faceted concept utilised in varying ways by different theological traditions. In Wesleyan thought, it is both the going-before of God, and the possibility of our coming-after in the economy of salvation. As Randy Maddox describes it, prevenient

[19] R. Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2005), 14.
[20] Jenson, 'Beauty,' 155.
[21] J. Milbank, 'Beauty and the Soul,' in *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 8.

grace is both the possibility of our hearing God's overtures of grace and the overtures themselves.[22] Prevenience means that God is everywhere and always going before us, inviting us to take part in the miracle of new life in Jesus.

New life in Jesus is the only possibility of creaturely beauty. To be spoken into beauty is to be called forward into the life God has prepared for us. It is to be invited into the future by the one who goes ahead of us. This priority of God's action guards against Pelagianism: our perfections, beauties, and graces are possible only because God has the initiative.

Jenson reads the initiative of God as entailing the radical ontological priority of the future.[23] The future is not sheer possibility, a barren rolling field. Jenson critiques the dialectical theologians for replacing the future with arrant 'futurity.'[24] But neither is the future closed or filled, so that time is nothing more than the moving image of timeless eternity.

> God's eternity is not that for him everything is already past, but that in love everything is still open, including the past. His eternity is that he can never be surpassed, never caught up with. He anticipates the future in the sense that however we press forward in time, we always find that God has already been there and is now ahead calling us on.[25]

Jenson has here articulated something approximate to the Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace. God meets every event before us, and is already ahead calling us on. Jenson makes explicit that which is often missing in Wesleyan thought: the temporal priority of God's prevenient activity. If this insight has any value, it is hard to see how a Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace could function without an actual future belonging to God. A God whose time is simple contemporaneity, whose knowledge is only of the present, cannot *preveniently* grace us.

Complicating our conceptuality of time is the fact that concrete statements about time are all retrospective. Sentences pertaining to God's prevenient action invoke the past-tense, because they are spoken from our present about what God has done 'before' we arrived where (or when) we are. But this is simply to say that our

---

[22] R. L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 89.
[23] Jenson, *God after God*, 165.
[24] Jenson, *God after God*, 161.
[25] Jenson, *God after God*, 171.

present is God's past. That God has already been here means that our present retrospective musings about God's action rely on divine futurity. The Christian God, then, must be both Alpha *and* Omega, the first and last word. God hedges us in behind and before. Only so can God be the 'great revolutionary' rather than a pitiable 'great reactionary.'[26]

But if God's being is not merely protological, but eschatological, what can be said of this future? Karl Barth's great innovation, in Jenson's interpretation, is the substitution of Jesus for timeless eternity. 'The gospel of Christ overcomes eternity and promises a future exactly in that it narrates a specific – and therefore past – story, the story of Jesus, as the future for which we may hope.'[27] Jesus of Nazareth is the content of our future.

It is, therefore, possible to narrate something about this future and to live for this future by taking hold of the past. Open theists often understand the future as love, frequently defined as divine benevolence allowing feckless creaturely freedom: love is sheer possibility. Jenson too defines the future as love, but not so vaguely. 'Love-in-general does not subsist, only particular loves,' and the love of the future is 'Jesus' love.'[28] It is his particular rendition of being-unto-death consummated by resurrection which is the openness of the future.[29] The love which obtains in the future is the mutual love of the Godhead opened out to include creaturely participation. It is the love made possible only because Jesus is the risen Lord.

I imagine that all this talk of the content of the future may have some of my openness brothers and sisters shifting in their seats. However, the extent to which the future is open is still an unsettled question in openness theology. John Sanders holds that there is absolutely no ontological content in the future; while Clark Pinnock, on the other hand, has argued that God has infallible knowledge of certain future divine actions and, according to the internal logic of the openness revision of divine omniscience, therefore the future has some limited ontology.

Does my location of beauty in the future close our prospects or entail determinism? There are two observations to make; one is a response, the other an evasion. If the gospel is true, then a future without beauty is a sheer counter-factual. I imagine that the

---

[26] Jenson, *God after God*, 171.
[27] Jenson, *God after God*, 61-62.
[28] Jenson, *God after God*, 162.
[29] Jenson asserts that were it not for the resurrection, Heidegger would be right. Jenson, *God after God*, 150.

evangelical heart of open theism will affirm the place of beauty in God's final rule, but attempt to uphold the possibility that things could go otherwise. I am merely discounting this possibility because our future is God, whose very being is constitutive of beauty. And now for the evasion: the charge that allowing the future any content necessitates determinism seems to be predicated either on timeless deity or on time as a single unified line stretching across the classroom board. This, I believe, mistakes the nature of time and God's relation to it.

Jenson's whole theological career has been a lengthy polemic against predicating timelessness of divinity, a position he arrives at by simply allowing Jesus to critique and determine every aspect of our theology and philosophy. But God does not simply enter into the flow of time from past to future upon creating it, for the very directionality of time requires some frame of reference. Being subject to time, I can speak of past, present, and future as a movement only by looking beyond myself.[30] God's relation to time is triunity; it is the 'accommodation God makes in his own life for persons other than the three he himself is.'[31] Time is the room which opens up between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for creation to obtain. God is not subject to time, but embraces time.

God is not without time, for Father, Son, and Spirit encompass time, but neither is God subject to a simple flow; time is 'neither linear nor cyclical'.[32] Jenson proposes that we understand time according to a different category: music, and uses the work of Jeremy Begbie to make this case.[33]

Musical time does not entail a simple past and future held apart by an inscrutable present. Instead, in music the past and future are held together in the present. Every note carries with it the tensions and resolutions that have gone before, while at the same time anticipating new tensions and resolutions to come. We can guess at the future content of a song, even on first hearing. This is because

---

[30] D. Knight, 'Jenson on Time', in C. Gunton, ed., *Trinity, Time, and Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert Jenson* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 73.
[31] Jenson, 'Does God have Time?' in *Essays in Theology of Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 199.
[32] Jenson, 'Ipse Pater non est impassibilis,' in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* J. F. Keating and T. J. White eds. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 124.
[33] Primarily, J. Begbie, *Theology, Music, and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

the structure of musical time operates on multiple levels simultaneously.

We could think of the length of the song as one single unit of time, but it is then divided into groups of smaller temporal units: a single bar, a theme, a movement, etc. A theme may embrace multiple bars, so the time of the theme differs from the time of the bar even though they are occurring concurrently. The resolution of tension at the level of the bar may be carrying forward tension at the level of the theme. Begbie divides these units up as bars and hyperbars, which spread out to make an indefinitely complex temporal structure.

The reality of any given time depends on the level of activity you intend. When asking after a moment in a song, do you intend the level of a meter-bar, which may entail a resolution, or a phrase or theme, which at precisely the same moment may be carrying forward a tension? Applying these insights to theology we may observe that at one level, God is our past, at another our present, and another our future; and these in a myriad of ways.

Musical time stratifies the nature of divine agency and its relation to creaturely agency. It may be that at one level God's grace is unilateral, adorning us with restored will, while at another it is cooperative. But either case is possible only because of God's temporal prerogative. Kenneth Collins observes something like this occurring in Wesley's sermons – spare of the metaphysical reflections – where grace is both synergistic *and* the work of God alone: Outler's 'third alternative.'[34] For Collins, these are not ontological distinctions in grace itself, but differing ways in which God works. At times grace operates unilaterally; at other times cooperatively. Returning to beauty, we now have a way to say that beauty both invites and ensnares, entices and overwhelms.

A theology of prevenient grace is primarily about divine initiative, but our point of reference is the present. It is a way of describing God's gracious presence in the world to give us goodness and beauty otherwise unobtainable. To locate beauty in the future, therefore, is not to render it entirely inaccessible to us. Were time sheer linearity, we would be alienated from beauty by the intermediate duration distancing us from beauty's future. However, we are able to make use of the eschatological connection because of the rich and plural structure of time. Beauty appears *here*, because

[34] K. J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 12.

here is precisely where God is establishing our future in Christ. The word of the gospel is true and effective now and at all times. It is this very word which frees up the future, for it promises the rich harmony and sublime beauty of actualised love. It promises a concrete future which we can occupy, rather than a bald futurity whose sublime formlessness may erase us.

Beauty always involves a surprise of the unexpected, and so participates in the freedom of the future. But this is not a future void of content, it is the ceaseless variation and development of the fecund harmony of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Beauty is a summons, a call to hope in the radical futurity of this particular past. But 'the End will not close the future – if the end is love.'[35] Beauty, as the call of the future to temporal beings, is a call to change; at once irresistible and nearly always rejected. Our judgements rarely agree, but we should not mistake this for a lack of beauty in the world. We are not the makers of beauty, beautifying with our beholder's eye, but participants in beauty. If the triune God is the universal subjectivity which beautifies, it may well be that our judgement is off, and even our well-established consensus of taste may be mistaken. But the beauty is real. And because it is real, established by the *triune* God, perhaps the very nature of beauty is plural, a real beauty of difference in unity. It may be that our differing judgements are not always indicative of error, but of a harmony too rich to sort out. Beauty is a song that we are only just beginning to hear, a swelling hymn sung by the Creator taking hold of us and inviting us to take our parts.

[35] Jenson, *God after God*, 162.