

INCONCLUSION

I will be found by you, says the LORD.

(Jeremiah 29:14)¹

I want to end in a junk shop. The British artist Anna M.R. Freeman, whose work appears on the cover of this book, has used her paintings to explore with moving intensity the odd ways in which disparate objects find themselves connected to one another. She is fascinated by the jumbled *mélange* of furniture, lamps, lumber, fabric, mirrors, crockery and glass that is typically found in junk shops. Things have been deracinated from a former environment where they once were at home, and await some new home, which is as yet undisclosed. Some are grandiose and baroque, and some humbly functional. Thrown together by circumstance, they seem also bound together by expectation. Though her paintings do not have human figures in them explicitly, they are deeply human: the objects she paints have been made for, and used in, human environments. They carry the traces – the smell, the imprint, the warmth – of their previous use. Eloquently, they are like signs of the human situation itself; they are *like* the humans who made and used them. We humans, too, as Freeman understands us, are marked by a sense of transition and longing:

The making of my work is motivated by an investigation of different structural environments that provoke a sense of longing, a strange remembering of times past and a hopeful looking forward into eternity. [...] [M]y work is not only about a particular longing for a permanent space but also [the] deep human desire for permanence in a world that shows so many signs of decay.²

¹ I here use the Revised Standard Version rather than the New Revised Standard Version used in most biblical quotations in this book

² Freeman, 2012. The quotation comes from an unpublished paper delivered at Biola University on 3 March 2012. Freeman's website can be visited here: <http://www.annamrfreeman.com> (accessed 25th July 2013).

We, like the objects found and painted by Freeman in junk shops, wait in hope for a consummation that we cannot yet see.³ For this reason, it seems, many of her paintings have titles (and sometimes deliberately biblically-resonant ones) that express human 'towardness': 'Anticipate', 'Waiting Silently', 'Waiting Hopefully', 'Assurance about what we do not see', and so on.

While they wait, however, Freeman's paintings allow these familiar, 'humanly-warm' objects to slip the leash in some way. They are presented to us in a way that also subverts the perspectives we usually use to place and explain and account for them. The old hierarchies which make a chandelier distinguishable from an oil can are suspended, and we do not easily see, at all times, whether we are seeing a small thing close up or a large thing far away, a surface or a depth, a detail or a whole, a joined thing or merely an adjacent thing. In this way, her painting works not only to accentuate the lack of control we exercise over 'what is coming' (because the transformations that may happen are not ones we may be able to predict at all, with any specificity) but also 'what is now' (because there is more to these objects and their relations with one another than what some conscious human design has made of them). In other words, although the denizens of the junk shops Freeman paints are in a condition of expectation, they are also purveyors of an intense sense of the surprising possibilities of the present moment. Partly by means of their odd juxtapositions, they work to make one another more intensely, more richly present to our gaze than they would be if they were in an environment that we took for granted. The artist contributes to this process by joining in with what the objects are already doing to one another: framing, heightening, intensifying one another. And she can do this because even in deracination, and even in anticipation, they are also in communion: a communion she finds and does not impose. They share across – even deconstruct – their boundaries. They thrill with a special quality of

³ In doing so, incidentally, they expose some of the pretensions of the baroque, which so dislikes emptiness that it seeks to fill every space; to satisfy every longing in the here and now, with extravagant decorative flourishes. It is a language of fullness, which can end up seeming like a sort of denial of what we know we do not (yet) have; the satisfaction of misplaced desire; a surfeit that leaves us still hungry. The junk shops (which themselves include now-dislocated baroque objects, and which ironically are often – in literal terms – as 'full' as an orchestrated baroque space) more honestly express the unfilled needs of creaturely existence.

‘betweenness’. The objects in the junk shops become an image of being itself as mutually participative because its source is in God and is going to God, and in this light it is possible to look at a Freeman painting with the words of Pseudo-Dionysius in one’s ears, and find that both mean more as a consequence:

[From God] comes the bare existence of all things, and hence their unions, their differentiations, their identities, their differences, their similarities, their dissimilarities, their communions of opposite things, unconfused distinctions of their interpenetrating elements; the providences of the Superiors, the interdependence of the Co-ordinates, the responses of the Inferiors, the states of permanence wherein all keep their own identity. And hence again the intercommunion of all things according to the power of each; their harmonies and sympathies (which do not merge them) and the coordinations of the whole universe; the mixture of elements therein and the indestructible ligaments of things; the ceaseless succession of the recreative process in Minds and Souls and in Bodies; for all have rest and movement in That Which, above all rest and all movement, grounds each one in its own natural laws and moves each one to its own proper movement.⁴

In light of all that has been said in the preceding chapters about the continual call to finding which is generally the task of creatures and specifically the task of Christian theology, these closing remarks cannot in good conscience call themselves a Conclusion – not, at least, if a Conclusion implies a final word.

Sometimes at their own instigation, the protagonists of this book (or, at least, of its case studies) have been helpfully interpreted by analogy with figures from the Old Testament. The tasks that faced the translators of the King James Bible have been illuminated by an examination of Ezra’s work to make the maculations of the Torah productive for his people. The radically-receptive experimentation of Carpaccio, who looked on death in the hope that God’s promises could ultimately give an assurance of life, was shown to have a productive fascination with the figure of Job. And Henry Vaughan, in a wilderness condition, was seen sustaining himself with the example of Ishmael. Ezra, Job and Ishmael have emerged as three – perhaps unexpected –

⁴ Dionysius the Areopagite, 1920, 97-98.