

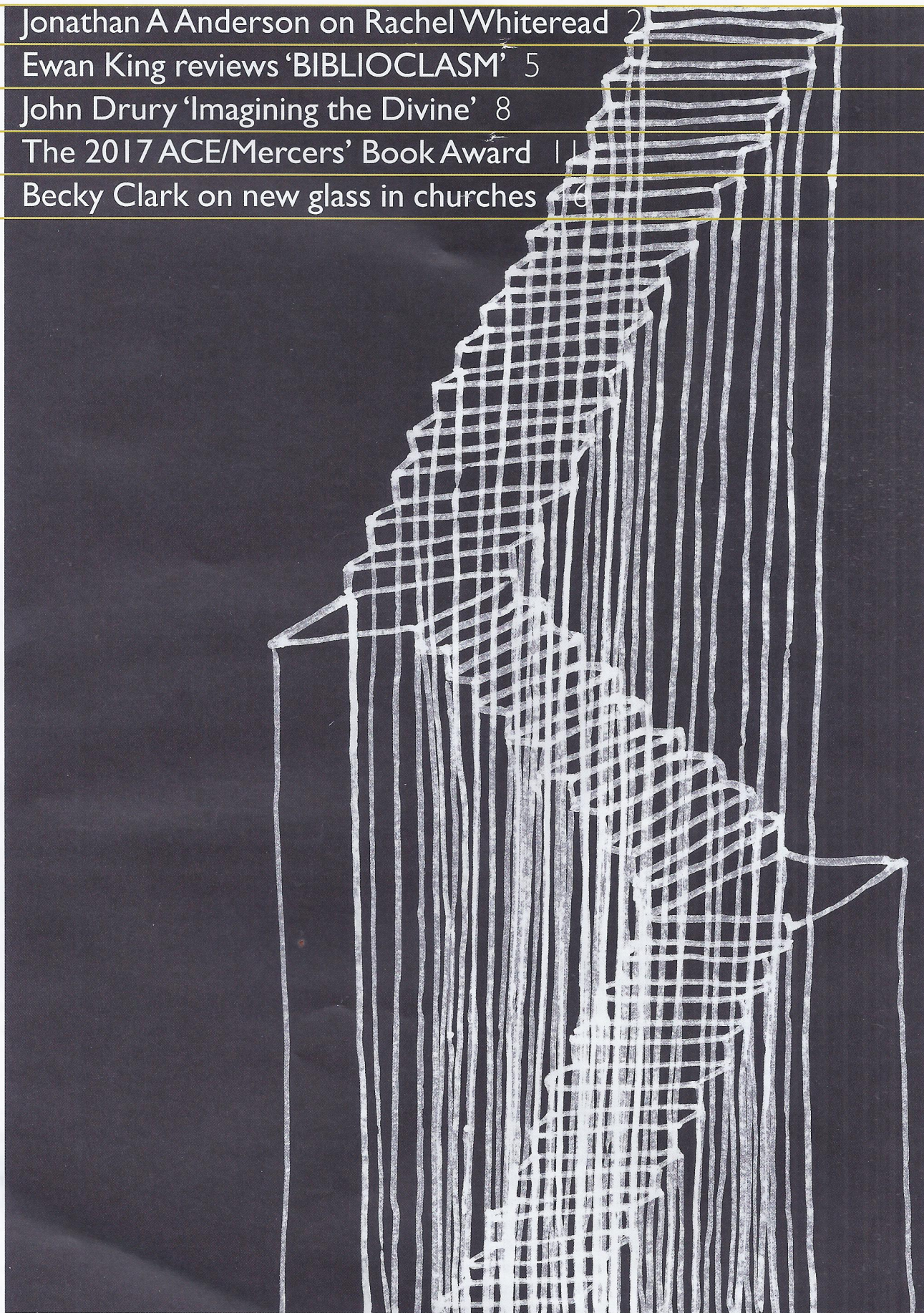
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Rachel Whiteread *Stairs*, 1995

BIBLIOCLASM

Edwin Pickstone

Swiss Church, London
21, 22, 28, 29 September 2017

With his show 'BIBLIOCLASM', which ran at the Swiss Church in London in September 2017, Glasgow-based printer, typographer and artist Edwin Pickstone gave the starring role to the gear, tackle and trim of his trade. This exhibition belonged to a series marking the anniversary of the Reformation, so the decision to foreground the practise of printing seemed appropriate, and the invitation to read these works in the context of the synergy between Gutenberg's technological inventions and Luther's theological innovations was readily accepted.

Whatever furnishings the Swiss Church usually accomodates (one suspects there isn't much) had been removed to make room for BIBLIOCLASM's eponymous centre-piece. Their absence served to accentuate the white chapel's elegant austerity. The piece itself took the form of hundreds of sheets of paper, each roughly the size of a smallish paperback, between them covering most of the church's wooden floor. Plain white sheets alternated with sugary pink; on each page a single word was printed in black ink. If gathered up and suitably reordered these words would comprise the complete 1604 text of Christopher Marlowe's tragedy *Dr Faustus*. We were allowed and indeed encouraged to walk over the sheets of paper. On the grey September day I visited this had occasioned a mild amount of shuffling and one or two pairs of boots had also left their mark on the work in dry Shaftesbury Avenue dust.

The piece began at the bottom left of the hall with the first word of Marlowe's prologue, 'Not'. From there it looped its way up the sanctuary line by line, but not word by word, since (with what was presumably the intention of foiling any attempt literally to 'read' the play) the lines themselves had been scrambled. Viewed from the entrance to the sanctuary, the first few dozen rows of text were small enough to be barely legible from a standing position. The size of Marlowe's scattered words increased gradually as the viewer approached the communion table and the final page's final word, 'Opus'.



Edwin Pickstone *BIBLIOCLASM*, 2017

As can probably be inferred even from so brief and so functional a description, this is not a work that is likely to impose a single meaning or mood on the viewer. BIBLIOCLASM is both conceptually and imaginatively open-ended. For this writer, perhaps influenced by the cool temperature of the Swiss Church, the work provoked more theoretical reflection than visceral reaction. I did try out a "dramatic" reading of the piece, however. Walking from entrance to altar with an eye on the text, one ought to have passed from the slack mood of curious open-mindedness in which Faust makes his initial contract, through the frenetic distraction of the play's central acts, to the panic-stricken horror of Faust's final moments. On making the experiment, I found that with each few steps, one did indeed register a corresponding shift in the semantic field, an ever-increasing incidence of terror, sulphur

and damnation! However, my attempt at reanimating the play in this way felt more like a wilful exercise in eisegesis than a real response to the work.

Pickstone's crib-sheet turned the viewer's thoughts in another direction, drawing attention to some antinomies in the contemporary semiotics of print. Where once we might have perceived printed words in contradistinction to the technologies which print supplanted, today we are more likely to contrast print to the newer technologies that are supplanting it in turn. Rather than being less incarnate than the handwritten manuscript, print has come to seem more fleshy and substantial than the virtual texts which crawl across our flatscreens, laptops, smartwatches and phones. Thus what once stood for ephemerality and disposability can now connote the tangible, the solid, the permanent.

This sea-change has not gone unremarked in the sphere of propaganda. Pickstone wryly references one political party's self-conscious deployment of the aesthetics of traditional print in a recent election campaign, where the usual pledges were made in distressed text, apparently worn by weather and time, but in fact entirely photo-shopped.

The three smaller pieces that accompanied the central work continued Pickstone's exploration of his theme. Two of them used ink concocted by the artist from the ashes of books he had burned himself (print-to-order books, the artist hastened to assure us: the piety of his bibliophilia apparently precluding the destruction of extant volumes). On the communion table a heavy tome was filled with page after page of solid squares, 'starless and Bible-black'.

The piece which perhaps most resonated with this reviewer, however, was *The Components of War and Peace*. This small work was rather tucked away by the organ loft, and as its punning title suggests, comprised all the material requisites for Leo Tolstoy's novel. Specifically these were the 'components' for a printing of the Penguin

paperback edition in English (presumably the still-celebrated Rosemary Edmonds translation of 1957). The loose sheets were neatly stacked in a solid block, on which a precise quantity of ink had been deposited and left to congeal. *The Components of War and Peace* might be read on one level as a droll riposte to Henry James's critiques of Tolstoyan formlessness. Be that as it may the work had a glassy, glossy tactility that I relished. As much as, and perhaps more than anything else in the exhibition this miniature oil-spill excited the senses, evoking childhood's fascination with ink in flow and at rest, making one regret the 'Please Do Not Touch' card, and making one twist and turn to catch a reflection, now of one's own face, now of the paradoxical glamour of Calvinist ecclesiastical architecture, now of the sanctuary lights, pricking the pitch-black gloss of coagulated ink.

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BIBLIOCLASM is part of a year-long series of installations entitled 'Being and Appearing', running at the Swiss Church until May 2018 (<http://beingandappearing.org.uk>)

Edwin Pickstone *The Components of War and Peace*, 2017

