

BLACKFRIARS

Disraeli. It is certain that "that distinguished foreigner" would enjoy reading Chapter xiv.

Finally, if anyone should still suppose that economic history is dull, let him borrow this book: it is a safe prophecy that he will want a copy as a permanent addition to his library.

T. CHARLES EDWARDS.

LITERATURE

DANTE LE THEOLOGIEEN. By P. Mandonnet, O.P. (Desclée de Brouwer; 15 frs.)

THE FABER BOOK OF MODERN VERSE. Edited by Michael Roberts. (Faber & Faber; 7/6.)

Leaving his own special field of study in which he had produced a lifetime's measure of first-rate work, P. Mandonnet would seem to have written the present book in a mood for relaxation; the result is not first-rate, but though interesting and incidentally very instructive, as a whole superficial and weak. The pivot of the book is the following novel thesis: that Dante was a cleric; that he advanced shakily to the stage of minor orders, and then lost his vocation through becoming absorbed first by poetry, then by philosophy. But that he repented: at first only momentarily, at the time of his writing the *Vita Nuova*, when he vowed to make reparation by writing something further that should be truly worthy praise of the grace of God which he had abused; but then, after his defection into philosophy recorded in the *Convivio*, that he came to himself completely, passed through the purgatory of his exile, and eventually wrote the *Commedia* in fulfilment of his *Vita Nuova* resolution, thus moreover taking up again in effect the clerical office from which he had disgracefully retreated.

This particular theory is linked up with a general purely allegoric characterization of Beatrice and of the "screen" ladies of the *Vita Nuova*. Nothing new in that; but it requires far better arguments nowadays than the author provides to maintain that from the first Beatrice was a purely allegoric creation, that she never played a flesh and blood part in the life of Dante. It seems to be taken as a matter of course that at the time of writing the *Vita Nuova* Dante should enjoy the same "degree of abstraction" from the physical as at the time of writing the *Commedia*.

But the weakest part of the book—which would need to be the strongest—is that which tries to prove by particular exegesis the theory of *Dante clericus*: that Beatrice does not simply represent divine grace or the supernatural order—which she certainly does in the *Commedia*, and probably also in the *Vita Nuova* though more circuitously: it is the assumption of *pure* allegory that we resent—but that the vicissitudes of Dante's relations with her

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represent the history of his priestly vocation: his unfaithfulness, his repentance, his equivalent reinstatement. Thus his first vision of Beatrice, when they were both aged nine, symbolizes his first formed desire of the clerical life. No attempt to bring the details of the vision and of its effects into line with this. The love which "held lordship over my soul" and "commanded me many times that I should seek to behold this most youthful angel: wherefore in my childhood often did I go seeking her" we are left to interpret perhaps of Dante's boyish fervour prompting him to a not too irregular attendance at the seminary lectures. And when the "natural spirit" in him "began to weep, and weeping said these words: 'Alas, wretched am I! for henceforth I shall be often impeded,'" he is thinking no doubt that it would really be nicer if he could miss those lectures altogether. And so this astounding exegesis continues, with its fantastic implications.

The second part of the book, which deals with the theological significance of the *Commedia*, is far more useful, and in fact contains a good deal that is most valuable. But the complete disregard of literary origins often falsifies the criticism. Dante like Beatrice has become an angel; an angel of the Schools however.

It is not unpleasant to pass from the thought of Dante to the English (and American) poets from whose work Mr. Michael Roberts has composed his anthology. They represent (there is no pretence at a full muster) a class or breed of poets who have escaped from troubadour stagnation, and whose various theories of poetry—each one's *dolce stil nuovo*, whether Imagist, Vers Libre, Surrealist, or what—have proved in the long run to have been for them in reality not theories but solvents of theories, slogans of obscure revolt from poetic formalism. With all their diversity of style and quality they are united in their striving after the impossible ideal of pure poetry,¹ of a poetry which knows no laws but those of its own intrinsic artistic life. In his helpful though breathless introductory commentary Mr. Roberts propounds "that this collection represents the most significant poetry of this age," inasmuch as "these poets were saying things which were true, and important, and which could not be said as well in any other way." This must be taken to mean, not that these poets have excelled in expressing existing truths or facts in a perfect way—they would then have been no more than recorders or spokesmen—but that they have tried with all their skill to be creative artists, to make poems which should be self-subsistently,

¹ Perhaps M. Maritain's account of the meaning and of the obligation of this ideal is as good a *mise au point* as can be found. See his *Fron-tières de la poésie* appended to the later edition of *Art et Scholastique*.

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absolutely, instead of merely relatively or reflectively, beautiful, and that they have been granted the inspiration more or less to justify their madness.

The muster includes Hopkins and Yeats; the war-victims Owen and Rosenberg; T. E. Hulme, Monro, Aiken, H. D., M. Moore; Pound and Eliot; Read, the Sitwells, E. and S.; L. Riding and R. Graves; and—to be brief—many others, down to number thirty-seven, born 1916. It is a thrilling book. If a pragmatic recommendation be desirable, there is always Mr. Roberts' final paragraph—. . . To read merely to concur in the judgments of our ancestors is to inhibit all spontaneous response and to miss the pleasure of that reading which moulds the opinions, tastes and actions of our time. The first important thing about contemporary literature is that it *is* contemporary: it is speaking to us and for us, here, now. Judgment can only follow an act of sympathy and understanding, and to let our appreciation grow outwards from that which immediately appeals to us is both wiser and more enjoyable," etc. It is true anyway that to refuse to read this poetry, from fear of being deceived, is to risk stifling one's capacity to read poetry at all. RICHARD KEHOE, O.P.

ESSAYS ANCIENT AND MODERN. By T. S. Eliot. (Faber & Faber; 6/-.)

The appearance of this volume of Mr. Eliot's essays is an event to be welcomed. The first five essays were included in the former volume *For Lancelot Andrewes*. Five have been added. For the ten Mr. Eliot himself claims "no greater unity than that of having been written by the same person." But since he is a conspicuous example of a mind alive and at one with itself, this is, in effect, no modest claim. In that living unity lies the value of the book and the significance of Mr. Eliot.

These ten essays are an expression of his opinion on a number of subjects, but we venture to think that his conclusions are of no account, or at most of secondary account. It would be so easy to miss his essential achievement were we concerned merely with agreeing or disagreeing with his opinions. Mr. Desmond McCarthy was possibly quite right in his recent attack, but to reduce the work of Mr. Eliot to that sort of "expert" criticism would maim it beyond endurance.

He has set out, like so many others, to form a catholic point of view, and, unlike so many, he has brought that effort to its natural maturity. There is a stage in the development of the mind when it appears to crystallize, to become wedded to conclusions, to fixed forms of material expression. The mind of its nature requires this. Dogmatic religion, far from doing violence to the mind, is the objective counterpart of a subjective requirement.