

infuses the world slip too easily into the completely different notion of an easy passage from nature to the supernatural achieved by nature itself? De Lubac is quite clear that nature's desire for the supernatural can only be a divine gift. He also has his own particular target in view: the strict observance Thomism of the earlier twentieth century, endorsed by the official commentary of Cajetan republished with the Leonine *Summa Theologiae*. How relevant is this historic attack on scholasticism to present-day church and theology?

Any thoroughgoing critique of Radical Orthodoxy needs, however, to offer constructive alternatives. It is easy to identify the movement's weaknesses, with Procrustean historiography and a reluctance to learn from competent scholars in the numerous fields it traverses being among the more obvious. Radical Orthodoxy has nevertheless succeeded in capturing imagination and revivifying the often sterile world of theological debate. Its ingenious use of postmodern packaging, and the intangible yet pervasive aura of authority, exclusivity and intrigue emanating from it, have attracted many younger scholars, particularly those in Anglican ministry of catholic persuasion. Radical Orthodoxy justifies the continued existence of churches and church ministry in a postliberal world: the Church is the only true community, theology is the discourse on which all others depend, liturgy is the consummation of the whole of human life, and secularity needs to be undermined comprehensively. Any challenge to such clear, simple principles as these needs to be prosecuted with similar verve and panache if it is to gain wide acceptance.

The early growth of Radical Orthodoxy was very much a phenomenon of Cambridge theology, with members identified and principles transmitted by means of the one-on-one tutorial system, and its novelty and interactive character prized as much as thorough research or rigorous scholarship. Since then, the movement has diffused both geographically and intellectually as personalities have moved on and ideas have spread. It will be interesting to see how long it is able to preserve any coherent identity.

DAVID GRUMETT

POETS AND GOD: CHAUCER, SHAKESPEARE, HERBERT, MILTON, WORDSWORTH, COLERIDGE, BLAKE by David L. Edwards, *Darton, Longman and Todd*, London, 2005, pp. xv + 256, £12.95 pbk. ISBN: 0-232-52577-3.

This book examines seven poets, six of whose work rests at the heart of the English literary canon, whilst that of George Herbert occupies a humbler – though still highly esteemed – place there. Very many of us would agree with David Edwards that these writers 'can come to be valued as useful and even enjoyable – indeed, even loved – escorts for life' (p. ix), and this is why he wishes to extend their readership. His approach is mainly biographical, exploring each poet's work in that context, and his style is clear and relaxed; a 'non-academic presentation' intended to 'persuade more readers to go not only to the texts but also to some of the scholarly literature which has added richly to knowledge and understanding' (p. xiv). He hopes that this poetry will 'stimulate some serious thoughts about life as a whole, for here is literature of the highest quality and of immortal power, and that may have a more lasting and profound influence than most of the material usually offered to us for our improvement or pleasure' (p. ix).

Strongly implicit in the religious bias of this book is a claim that these poets can help people in their spiritual quests. However, the content of *Poets and God* does not really justify its title: we are told rather more about these poets' attitudes towards the institution of the Church and to some of its doctrines than about their relationships with God. A closer study of how their spirituality both informed and was nourished by their personal experience and creative endeavours would be more interesting and potentially more beneficial.

Poets and God contains very little theological reflection and this of a rudimentary kind. The author seems most concerned – even *very* concerned – to locate the poets' beliefs in relation to the prevalent Christian faith in the England of their times, with evident unease whenever they differ from it. Furthermore, given that a case is being argued that poetry can inspire or guide the perplexed modern reader, it seems perverse to include no writers more recent than the middle of the nineteenth century, especially when there are many excellent twentieth-century poets, such as T.S. Eliot, Patrick Kavanagh, Geoffrey Hill, Kathleen Raine, R.S. Thomas or Wendell Berry, whose work is more obviously applicable to that need.

Right from the first chapter, discussing Chaucer, Edwards struggles to keep God in the picture at all and only rarely manages to bring him to its centre. Chaucer is at his most brilliant when describing human character in its diverse manifestations: 'When dealing with theology, as he did occasionally, he was every inch a layman' (p. 2). He made no pretence of being a spiritual author nor of being a holy man, so it seems unfair – and quite irrelevant – to observe that 'two weeks after' Julian of Norwich's vision of 'the loving heart of God', Chaucer 'submitted a claim for expenses incurred while on an official visit to Italy' (p. 33). In the second chapter, we are informed that 'Occasionally Shakespeare can show that he is not completely ignorant of theology' (p. 38), a comment which patronises the poet. Previously a biographer of John Donne, Edwards may be expected to be more comfortable with his contemporary Herbert, a poet who is, like the mature Donne, overtly religious, thus well suited to the remit of this work. Alas, he too seems diminished by Edwards' treatment: 'one of the difficulties confronted by this poet is that God is not always pleasantly simple to understand' (p. 104). Isn't this a universal difficulty and the principal reason for theology?

According to Edwards, 'The life and death of John [Wordsworth] had made William a Christian believer' (p. 194), yet 'as a major poet Wordsworth died not long after his brother' (*ibid.*). Together these assertions seriously misrepresent Wordsworth's complex personality and beliefs whilst also implying that Christians cannot be great poets. Fascinating in themselves, Coleridge's theological, metaphysical and mystical speculations received more of his life's attention than did the writing of poetry, so they should be carefully considered by any biographer, especially one concentrating on Coleridge's religion, yet Edwards merely glances at this material. He continues to be both inaccurate and trite, stating, for instance, that Coleridge's 'outward voyage [to Malta] had so humiliated him because of illness resulting from opium, and his dependency on the drug had become so obvious, even to himself, that he decided to become an orthodox Christian believing in God as Creator but also as Saviour and as Inspirer' (p. 210). Anyway, who *decides* thus? And it is ridiculous to suggest that Blake 'was a genius damaged because he never had an hour's normal schooling' (p. 220). Edwards is at his most inept when interpreting Blake's poetry and completely confused by his mysticism. In a moment of desperation, he suggests: 'It seems possible that Blake wrote "God is no more" because he was in a hurry to find a word rhyming with "adore"' (p. 239).

It is commendable to write accessibly for a popular readership, but this does not sanction error or banality, both of which are plentiful in this book. Edwards's own analysis of this great English poetry is pedestrian, sometimes almost idiotic in its lack of perception, and where the commentary is more sophisticated it has evidently been derived from secondary sources (these are acknowledged at the end of the book). *Poets and God* is a far from satisfactory account of these poets' lives, it grossly undervalues their creative achievements, and it even fails to do justice to their Christian faith. If this book draws some new readers to classic English poetry, it will have achieved that part of the author's generous purpose, but, alas, it has negligible value as cultural history or as literary criticism.

MARTIN HAGGERTY