

Reviews

PETRARCH. POET AND HUMANIST by Kenelm Foster. *Writers of Italy Series*, 9. Edinburgh University Press, 1984. pp. xii and 214. Hb. £7.00.

Any attempt at providing a complete account of the life, writings and philosophy of Petrarch faces formidable difficulties. The sheer volume and diversity of primary materials to be consulted is itself intimidating: collections of lyric verse and of extended narrative in Italian (each available in manuscripts recording various stages of a complex, long-drawn-out evolution); verse epic, dialogue, moral and historical treatises and polemic in Latin; and huge collections of Latin epistles (not all available in modern critical editions). Perhaps more intimidating, however, is the complex, ambiguous, self-absorbed, self-contradictory character of Petrarch himself: 'this ardent Italian' (observes Fr Foster) 'spent half his life in Provence; this cleric—no priest and having no cure of souls—was virtually a layman; this scholar and intellectual never had to face a classroom of students; this lover passionately, yet platonically, loved another man's wife; this "celibate" was the father of two children' (p. 141)

Few scholars, then, are qualified to write anything like a complete account of Petrarch's writings; and fewer still could write such an account without becoming either over-awed or exasperated by the poet's egregious personality. Fr Foster's *Petrarch. Poet and Humanist* is doubly distinguished in being both exceptionally erudite and in maintaining an exceptionally well-balanced attitude towards the poet. Fr. Foster employs his learning to fine effect in elucidating what seems difficult or obscure in Petrarch's attitudes; yet he is willing to concede that such attitudes *are* sometimes, in the final analysis, difficult to fathom. So it is that Fr Foster is able to urge readers who would dismiss a certain late Petrarchan letter as 'senile fuss' to reconsider their judgement in the light of 'an attentive reading of the *Tusculan Disputations*, II—IV'; yet he at once concedes that 'there is something fussy, and oddly so, about the letter' (p. 37). Again, Fr. Foster shows immense (and cogently-argued) admiration for Petrarch's intellectual achievement; yet, as a professional religious, he can wryly judge *De otioso religioso* (Petrarch's eulogy of monasticism) to be 'as insipid as most such eulogies written by laymen' (p. 8). The reader often feels party to a critical dialogue conducted between author and poet; and sometimes Fr. Foster (following the example of the Petrarchan *Secretum*) turns his critical enquiry inward to question his own assumptions. On several occasions he rejects his own previously-published opinions outright; and on p. 176 he makes a categorical statement in the text and then (having pondered the subject further) disagrees with himself in a footnote. This flexible, questioning, self-questioning approach accords well with the spirit of Petrarch's intellectual enterprise, and with that of Petrarch's spiritual master, Augustine.

The essence of this book's excellence resides, I would argue, in its resolute respect for the letter of the Petrarchan text; its assumption that Petrarch means precisely what he says. Petrarch himself valued clarity, above all, in his writing: but it is difficult for modern readers (especially English readers) to appreciate the precision of Petrarch's poetic vocabulary; for that vocabulary, ransacked by thousands of minor talents over the centuries, has come to resemble a repository of clichés, available for the most casual, routine employment. It will surprise many readers to learn that familiar terms such as 'errore', 'errare', 'vano' and 'vaneggiare' are employed by Petrarch with 'vigilant lucidity' (p. 78). Such vigilance and such lucidity is characteristic, too, of Fr

Foster's own critical discourse; here, for example, in his analysis of four Laura poems: 'yet the resultant image is always indistinct (I do not mean confused)...' (p. 136). Through such scrupulous respect for the Petrarchan text, expressed through such scrupulous critical language, Fr. Foster is able, in the course of his book, to trace Petrarch's evolving philosophy, his Christian humanism. (Again, it must be stressed that such a term is precisely formulated and precisely employed: see p. 157). Perhaps more revelatory to an English audience, however, are the consequences of approaching each Petrarchan lyric utterance as a self-sufficient philosophical statement. English students (and teachers) have traditionally read Petrarchan sonnets by the dozen, hoping to accumulate some impressionistic 'picture' of Petrarch *en courant*. Such habits of reading should not survive a reading of Fr. Foster's *Petrarch*.

The organisation of such an all-inclusive work naturally poses some problems; these are candidly addressed in the Preface. Fr Foster decides upon a three-fold division of material (with the understanding, of course, that such divisions cannot be mutually exclusive): The Life (pp. 1–22); The *Canzoniere* (23–140); The Philosophy (141–185). The first chapter traces Petrarch's family origins, the 'elegant dissipation' (p. 3) of his early years at Avignon, his refusal to accept any benefice involving the cure of souls ('"I have enough to do ... looking after my own"', p. 6), his discovery of the Ciceronian epistle as the perfect vehicle for the indulgence of his own 'insatiable but engaging egotism' (p. 7), his various wanderings and diplomatic activities in Italy and Provence, his championing of Rome and his hatred of Avignon and of scholasticism. The second chapter, on the *Canzoniere*, represents the work's most substantial and remarkable achievement. It is divided into five sections: (i) 'From Latin to the Volgare' (an excellent examination of Petrarch's ambiguous relationship with the Italian vernacular); (ii) 'The Contents of the *Canzoniere*'; (iii) 'The Making of the *Canzoniere* (containing some important revisions of Wilkin's work on this subject); (iv) 'Metrical Forms'; (v) 'Stylistic Soundings'. A careful reading of each of the first four sections will equip the diligent reader with the critical vocabulary and analytic technique requisite for a close reading of a Petrarchan lyric; and section five provides a dozen such readings, outstanding examples of practical criticism at its most versatile. The value of this chapter is usefully augmented by the index to individual *Canzoniere* lyrics provided at the back of the book.

The brevity of the final chapter is a little disappointing, although it might be argued that the two earlier chapters have already introduced many of the philosophical ideas that this chapter elaborates. The preceding *Canzoniere* analysis has certainly prepared us for Fr Foster's memorable characterisation of Petrarch's religion as, 'at bottom, a cry to God prompted by fear and horror of death' (p. 147). This third chapter sees Petrarch developing 'from being a spell-bound investigator of the past' to being a Christian humanist, turning all this pagan culture to account 'in a wide-ranging, highly critical assessment of his own medieval world—a critique not of its fundamental beliefs but of its culture in the sense of its intellectual fashions and pretensions...' (pp. 158–9). The decision to end this final chapter with the *Secretum* is a happy and successful one, in that this Latin prose dialogue sees classical, spiritual, artistic and biographical themes knotted together at a moment of acute mid-life crisis. Fr Foster follows Francesco Rico in assigning this work to the years 1351–3 (that is, to a period following the calamitous plague of 1348 and the death of Laura) rather to the traditionally-assumed dating of 1342; and this case seems convincing, especially (I would add) when measured against the chronology of Petrarch's relationship with Boccaccio.

This book, then, is a work of mature scholarship which offers an immensely-learned, personal (but not idiosyncratic) account of Petrarch as poet and humanist. Nothing of comparable scope or quality exists in English, and (at just £7.00 hardback) it should become the standard introduction to Petrarch's life and writings for many years to come. Many insights linger in the mind. For me the most memorable (and the most unsettling) is the suggestion or intuition, developed throughout the book, that Petrarch

gradually came to realise, as the decades passed, that for all his tireless trumpeting of Latin culture he had made a fundamental, colossal mistake; he had backed the wrong horse. Had he not sunk most of his youthful energies into the unfinished and unfinishable Latin *Africa*, he might just have written an extended-narrative masterpiece in his native Italian.

DAVID WALLACE

A DICTIONARY OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, edited by J.M. Sutcliffe. SCM Press, London. pp. xviii + 376. £14.95.

In association with the Christian Education Movement, SCM have added a dictionary of Religious Education to their previous dictionaries of Christian Ethics, Christian Theology, and Liturgy and Worship. One might wonder whether the comparative narrowness of the field (religious education is considerably less extensive than Christian theology, for example) might lead to an overblown compilation lacking in substance. While this book does not entirely overcome this charge, in general it gives an admirably detailed coverage of all aspects of religious education. The dictionary is unashamedly written for an English readership—there are no entries on England, Great Britain or the United Kingdom; but there are entries on Wales, Scotland and Ireland, together with many other countries—and it contains contributions from many who are foremost in religious education in England, and a sizeable number from outside England. The entries generally give information not easily available elsewhere, followed each time by a short bibliography. It is, then, an important book for those involved in teacher training in the subject, but otherwise it is for the library shelf rather than personal possession by the student or the general reader.

The editorial process seems to have been admirably performed by John Sutcliffe, but inevitably in a work of this kind the quality of entries varies considerably. The entry on Israel, for example, has been written by an Israeli Jew who tells us about Jewish religious education in Israel but nothing about Christians and Muslims. Similarly and less understandably, the entry on Italy begins by telling us that 'substantially religious education in state schools is under the jurisdiction of the Catholic Church' but then proceeds to tell us a great deal about the Waldensians and Italian Protestant groups but virtually nothing about Catholic religious education. Occasionally an entry reflects the obsession of a contributor who has carried out his own research, rather than surveying the field. A number of entries are rather vacuous: it would be invidious to list these, but some of the contributors have my sympathy, for how can you write anything of substance on religious education and 'Artefacts' for example? Contributions which are excellent as *dictionary entries* include David Konstant on 'Catechetics' where, however one estimates catechetics, we are told succinctly and clearly what the subject is; and 'United States' by Gabriel Moran who, as a Roman Catholic, outlines the religious education of *all* major religious groups in that country, inside and outside schools.

One of the contributors has told me that he was given very little guidance on what kind of entry was required and this has allowed many writers to be discursive and evaluative, which has in turn led to many valuable insights, but also some waffle. Among the more valuable entries for those working in schools are 'Management of RE in the Secondary School', 'Moral Development', 'Skills' and 'RE: Nature of'. Other articles which proved problematical for me included the one on 'Science and Religion' which presupposes at the outset a radical disjunction between the natural sciences and religion, a viewpoint which is reminiscent of Schleiermacher and which I am reluctant to accept. Certainly it would be hard to teach a course on 'Science and Religion', as I have in fact done in the past, if there were not some connection between the two.

David Jenkins, I was disappointed to see, perpetuates the idea shared by John McQuarrie and others that 'Theology' is the study of religious belief and practice within a particular religious tradition by those who are committed to those beliefs. This implies