

# Reviews

**THE MIDDLE ENGLISH MYSTICS** by Wolfgang Riehle. *Routledge & Kegan Paul*. London, 1981. pp xvi + 244. £12.95.

This book, by the Professor of English at the University of Graz, is an introduction to the medieval English mystical writings and is intended primarily for students, rather than a theologian. Riehle begins by putting his subject in its context and discusses the public for which these works were intended, a public which clearly included many laymen and women, and also the relation of English mystical literature to that of the continent. This turns out to be an intricate relationship; mystics in England and the continent knew of one another and there are striking parallels particularly in female mysticism; texts travelled from the continent to England and perhaps *vice versa*, but Riehle argues that the similarities that exist are to be accounted for, in the main, by the common heritage of Christian Latin mysticism rather than by any direct influence: in particular he casts doubt on the influence widely supposed to have been exercised by the Dominican mysticism of the Rhineland on English mysticism.

The main part of the book is an examination of the metaphors used by the English mystics and a comparison with the use of such metaphors found in continental mysticism. This approach has one very considerable advantage over the more directly theological approach often adopted in that it ensures that attention is paid to the language and ideas of the English writers themselves: in contrast a theological approach often looks through the English mystics, as their theology is usually derivative and often expressed better elsewhere. It emerges that many traditional metaphors are little used in English mystical literature in comparison with that of the continent: the metaphor of the journey is

rare, as is the idea of seeing God in the created order; there is little anthropomorphism, little use of the notion of God's infinity, no use of the metaphors of sea or lake for God, or that of the wilderness. The metaphor of 'ground' is used to mean 'solid ground' rather than 'abyss' as with the Germans. Riehle argues too that the English mystics are not nearly so creative in their use of language as the German mystics, and that their contribution to the development of their own language was small (though not as small as the *Middle English Dictionary*, with its neglect of the mystical writers, would lead one to think). All this is well done and of great interest. The main weakness of the book is the author's shaky grasp of the theological tradition that lies behind the English mystics. This comes out in various ways, as when for instance he says that the idea of prayer as ascent begins with John Damascene and cites a passage in which Damascene is, in fact, quoting Evagrius who in any case did not himself start the idea, or when the author is surprised by what are in fact commonplaces of theology, e.g. the idea that heaven is not a place, or the notion of evil as *privatio boni*. More important, though, is his misunderstanding of Augustine's doctrine of the trinitarian image in the soul, and his seeing in Augustine an antithesis between love and knowledge, which obscures for him some of the ways in which medieval mysticism is distinctive. And though his emphasis on the use of metaphor is in the main illuminating, sometimes it misleads him, as for instance when the mere presence of the metaphor of 'mirkness' in Hilton leads him to reject the idea, defended by, among others, Phyllis Hodgson, that there is a real

difference in the understanding of the soul's union with God between the *Cloud* and Walter Hilton.

This is an interesting and illuminating book and it is good to have it in English.

The fact that all quotations remain in the original (Middle English, Middle German, Latin) perhaps limits its potential readership more than is necessary or desirable.

ANDREW LOUTH

**LETTERS FROM A "MODERNIST": The Letters of George Tyrrell to Wilfrid Ward 1893-1908. Introduced and annotated by Mary Jo Weaver. Patmos/Sheed & Ward. pp xxxiv + 192. £17.50.**

I first became interested in the Catholic modernists during the 1920s. Then and for long afterwards it was regarded as an eccentric interest, which received little encouragement. But since Vatican II, I have found it difficult to keep up with the stream of books, articles and academic theses that have been appearing on the various aspects of the modernist movement or crisis and about the numerous personalities who were more or less involved in it. It has become a favourite hunting-ground for research students, especially in the U.S.A. And none of the modernists has been receiving more posthumous attention than George Tyrrell.

Professor Weaver does not explain why she placed the word "Modernist" in quotation marks in the title of this book. While the application of the term to several others to whom it has been applied may reasonably be questioned, there can be no question that Tyrrell was an outstanding modernist and will always and rightly be treated as one of the central figures in the movement. The present volume contains his letters to Wilfrid Ward of which only extracts have previously been preserved. At one stage in the development of this thought Tyrrell found himself in close accord with Ward. At the time they both looked upon themselves as disciples of Newman, and Ward continued to do so till the end of his life. The interest of these letters lies primarily in the light they shed on Tyrrell's final disagreement with Ward, but they have a wider interest than that.

Tyrrell was a rarely gifted writer with an extraordinarily lively mind, and everything he wrote is worth reading. Moreover, the questions that exercise his mind are

still very much alive, and are no less awkward now than they were eighty years ago, though they can be discussed in a less acrimonious manner. In 1900 Tyrrell wrote: "Men who are humble in themselves find compensation in cracking up their party or nation. Corporate pride and vanity is a great problem. It seems a condition *sine qua non* for the success of a cause yet ethically it is as indefensible as personal pride (pp 51 f)."

In addition to the letters to Ward there are included here (a) some letters from Tyrrell to other correspondents, (b) his hitherto unpublished article "Who are the Reactionaries?", and (c) the complete text of the Joint Pastoral Letter of Cardinal Vaughan and the bishops of the Westminster province on "The Church and Liberal Catholicism", which naturally agitated both Tyrrell and Ward and many other people, and from which few readers nowadays are likely to receive much edification.

Professor Weaver's introduction adequately supplies the background of the material here made available, and her annotations to the letters are ample to a fault; e.g. she goes so far as to explain that *substantia materialis* means 'material substance' (pp 38 f). There are however occasional inaccuracies and she ought surely to have explained the reference to "the bones of King Edmund" in this prophetic observation by Tyrrell: "As to the Joint Pastoral I think the issue of all the correspondence is that it will be quietly shelved and forgotten in some cupboard together with the bones of King Edmund" (p 70). The reference is to what at the time was the notori-