

FAITH, HOPE AND POETRY : THEOLOGY AND THE POETIC IMAGINATION
by Malcolm Guite, *Ashgate*, Farnham, 2010, pp 257, £47.50

The last few years have seen a general academic consensus on the need for and legitimacy of an interdisciplinary study of literature and theology, an acceptance that owes much to the work of scholars such as Stephen Prickett and David Jasper. What will emerge as the parameters of that study is still unsure. However, the book under review here belongs to its hinterland rather than its mainstream. *Faith, Hope and Poetry*, which bears an endorsement from the Archbishop of Canterbury, is an interesting exercise which promises one offering, only to deliver a different one. According to the dustjacket:

‘Guite builds towards a substantial theology of imagination and provides unique insights into truth which complement and enrich more strictly rational ways of knowing’.

This kind of language always makes one wary: what sort of thing might a theology of the imagination be? How would one identify its categories? Guite explains his purpose by asserting his conviction that the poetic imagination is truth-bearing:

‘Through poetry I hope to explore our imagination as an aspect of the *Imago Dei* in humankind, as an active, shaping power of perception exercised both individually and collectively, and as a faculty which is capable of both apprehending and embodying truth... My hope is to illustrate the ways in which the poetic imagination can help to redress a lost balance, renew and deepen our vision of the world and, in so doing, also enrich our understanding of theology’. (15)

First of all it should be remarked that this is quite an expensive book and one would have expected a higher standard of copy-editing. There are comparatively few pages without an error of some kind, omitted words, wrong punctuation or misspellings. Lope de Vega’s name appears in two different forms, both incorrect, ‘Magdelen’ (College) and ‘Phillip’ (Larkin) fairly leap off the page and Stephen Prickett’s magisterial *Words and The Word* (1986) features in the bibliography as *Word and Word*.

Malcolm Guite is chaplain of Girton College, Cambridge, and this is recognisably a clerical rather than academic book. He writes of a disjunction between Reason and Imagination, which he attributes to the deleterious effect of the Enlightenment, and which, he says, has relegated religion to the area of the subjective inner mind while science has assumed the mantle of real, objective knowledge. One has only to say ‘Richard Dawkins’ to appreciate that there is truth in what Guite says, but the development of which he writes has a much more complicated provenance than simple Cartesian dualism. Guite does refer in passing to Owen Barfield’s discussion of a participational or transactional consciousness that informed poetry from the earliest days, a consciousness which later dissipated. Stephen Prickett, in *Words and The Word* (1986) deals at some length with this change of consciousness, but in a much profounder and more nuanced way. Whatever one calls it, the disposition, evident in medieval literature, to read the direct action of God into the experience of the natural world was disappearing long before the Enlightenment and is logically a target of Luther’s earliest writings on grace and the will: the practitioners of Radical Orthodoxy, indeed, suggest that the rot was already setting in with Duns Scotus.

The Reason/Imagination opposition, then, is just not up to the job of explaining why early modern scientists thought that language could dispense with imagery, or exactly how this misapprehension contributed to the increase of secularism. Guite follows a rough chronological order in his discussion of various poems, but the whole is contained within a framework of reference to images found in the poetry of Seamus Heaney. Heaney and Coleridge are, he declares, the main writers to whom he owes the development of his ideas, but they do not, singly or together, provide a unified structure for his book, and the piecemeal quality of the chapters suggests something on the lines of a poetical *Desert Island Discs*.

Guite's discussion of the OE *Dream of the Rood* is sensitive, and in many ways valuable to readers unfamiliar with the poem, but his treatment of it is representative of his general method. He introduces the *Dream* with a short overview of Macrobius's categories of dream-vision, which for the general reader is not necessary and for the academic not adequate. Most readers can deal readily with the dream-trope, but for the non-academic, some comment on the Germanic warrior-ethos according to which the crucified and abused Christ was portrayed, strangely and powerfully, as a proactive hero (*der Held von Juda* of Gen: 49), would have been helpful. Instead, Guite comments on the literary motif of the warrior dying with his lord, which is not particularly relevant to this poem. That said, Guite's commentary, on parts of the *Dream* and different modern versions of it, is thoroughly worthwhile and, for devotional purposes, often inspirational. A chapter follows, on "feigning" in Shakespeare, quoting speeches from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. This does not present any surprises except the complete absence of any reference to Platonism and to Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesie*, which is very relevant to the question of truth in poetry and which might have helped to dispel the impression that this chapter was included only because Guite liked the Shakespearian passages so much. In the Jesuit poet and martyr, Robert Southwell, there was a contemporary writer whose conscious Ignatian use of the imagination might have aided his argument, but Guite ignores him (as, more surprisingly, he largely ignores the later Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins). The chapter on Donne and Herbert works well as devotional writing but fails to comment on Augustine's influence on Donne, which, in the context of imaginative composition, might have been illuminating, and leaves unvisited the doctrinal problems suggested by Herbert's use of metaphor. With Milton, serious difficulties arise. It is almost impossible to read *Paradise Lost* as devotional material. The Christian reader may marvel, as C.S. Lewis does, at the piety and intellectual grandeur of Milton, but it is doubtful that his poetic appreciation will have very much to do with promoting the love of God.

Guite then jumps rather a long way from Vaughan to Coleridge and the Romantics, giving the reader the impression that there was no religious poetry written between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. He is unjustly dismissive of Pope and completely ignores Dryden, which, considering how much of Dryden's output was religiously propelled, seems perverse. The section on Coleridge, which the reader has been expecting to trace the derivation and provide an exposition of Guite's theology of imagination, comes as something of a disappointment. Guite paraphrases Coleridge's theory of Secondary Imagination, but does not clarify or build upon it. Coleridge's celebrated intellectual excursions from poetic theory into other areas of thought are groundbreaking, but they do not in any sense form a systematic philosophy or theology.

Malcolm Guite is clearly a sensitive and perceptive reader of poetry, not a critic, and as an admirer of George Steiner, he should appreciate the distinction. This book is a successful and often powerful celebration of certain mostly religious poems for devotional purposes. In claiming to outline a particular theology,

however, the author has overestimated what an enthusiasm for poetry is able to do. Sometimes, certainly, the imagination may bear witness to the truth, but, just as often, it does not. Both Sidney and Southwell, had Guite mentioned them, could have testified to the fact that the will is an all-important factor in such witness. Truth is beauty, of a sort, but beauty is not always truth and privileging the 'reasons of the heart' is not a very reliable way to learn about God.

Guite writes sympathetically about the poems of Seamus Heaney and had he confined himself to this poet he would have made a better book and a better case, as Heaney's poetry amply demonstrates the importance of authorial intention in 'God-talk'. This is more nourishing and convincing fare for the truth-seeker than the occasional and fortuitous glimpse of something Christian-friendly in Hardy or Larkin. Perhaps Guite is arguing for the worth of poetry, in which he is to be supported, but his argument is not a particularly beguiling one. In a brief visit to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, he remarks that the *The Wasteland* and *Ulysses* were published in the same year, implying that they somehow present a refutation of it. One feels inclined to pin Malcom Guite down and ask him to locate and explicate the precise occasions of 'truth' in these two great modern works. Of course, such a silly enterprise would get us nowhere. The need for poetry is as natural to human beings as physical hunger, though one not as regularly recognised or indulged. It is ultimately God-given, as food is, and sometimes, given the will to prayer, it acts like a grace after meals, but a grace is not the same thing as a theology

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SOME LATER MEDIEVAL THEORIES OF THE EUCHARIST. THOMAS AQUINAS, GILES OF ROME, DUNS SCOTUS, AND WILLIAM OCKHAM by Marilyn McCord Adams, *Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, pp. viii + 318, £ 30 hbk*

Talk of Christ's presence in the Eucharist has often been understood as endorsing the idea that celebrations of the Eucharist are nothing but liturgical assemblies in which their participants remember Christ and witness to him. A very different view of the Eucharist takes Christ to be literally on Christian altars (if also in heaven). Is one of these views preferable to the other? One can easily see how someone might want to embrace the first rather than the second since there seem to be formidable objections to the claim that when the Eucharist is celebrated Christ (the man who lived and taught in Galilee) comes to be present where something else is to start with (bread and wine). Theologians sometimes speak of the 'Eucharistic change', the idea being that what is first bread and wine comes to be the body and blood of Christ. But though one can readily grasp the idea that things often change into radically different things (that cows turn into beef, say), the 'Eucharistic change' (in traditional Catholic thinking, anyway) seems not to be a change in this sense. The idea is not that we start with some physical objects which become different physical objects because of ways in which causes in the world act on them. The idea seems to be that we start with bread and wine and that these, though not by being acted on by anything physical, truly become the body and blood of Christ while not appearing to be so. Our usual notion of change (as in cows becoming beef, or as in someone getting to look older) seems not really to work when it comes to talk about the Eucharist.

So how should one understand such talk? One might say that it is a deep mystery and should not be probed. Medieval thinkers, however, stand out, not so much as probing (should that suggest something impious) but as trying defensively to show that talk of Christ becoming present in the Eucharist is not