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reads

Faith, Hope and Poetry

(Ashgate, 2010)

by Malcolm Guite

THE EXPRESS AIM of this packed, rich and unusual book is to show that poetic imagination is truth-bearing and that this is valuable to theology. This ensues from an enterprise which is growing in certain centres in Britain today, the universities of St Andrews and Cambridge notably. For Malcolm Guite writes as part of a recent attempt, mainly by theologians, to read poetry in the light of Christian theology and to see any approach to reality, science included, as of necessity imaginative and transfigurative—both those words being key terms throughout. For cognate recent studies one thinks of Lucy Beckett's *In The Light of Christ*, David L Edwards's *Poets and God*, Rowan Williams's rather more general *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love*, and other books, including this one, emerging from the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts based at St Andrews. It has happened before—C S Lewis's *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942) comes to mind—but not usually as part of an albeit loose-knit group enterprise.

Some general introduction to this review is perhaps needed, before getting to grips with the actual text. For such a project entails a different approach from that normally taken by the professional academic literary critic. The difference is epistemological and indeed one of faith. Anyone may read the book with profit—valuable insights abound—but at least some hypothetical acceptance of faith may from time to time be needed. Most generally, as Guite says at the start, "in almost every epistemological field, [there is today] a renewed emphasis on imagination as essential for a fuller knowledge of the world and ourselves", as opposed to the "reductive, demythologising period" (1) of recent decades—and indeed, as comes out throughout, the eighteenth century Enlightenment itself, something of a *bête noir* for Guite. It is no coincidence that the book gives no attention to any eighteenth century poet at all. The Enlightenment world's separation of observer from observed, and reason from imagination, is seen from the start as a failure which has to be discarded. All this has implications.

The implications are two, concerning the two central tenets of Christianity, namely the belief in God, and in God's incarnation as man in Jesus Christ. The first implication is that both nature and humankind are *together* productions of the divine imagination foundationally. "The outward 'objects' of nature are continuously given and made by the divine Mind and Imagination, they are the 'eternal language' of the Divine Poet, whose *poesis* made us and our minds also, and made our minds to be an image and reflection of his own" (161). The second implication, repeated often, is that Jesus Christ, God's incarnation, is "the light that lightens every man [sic] who comes into the world"; and so the theme of light as analogy for, indeed maybe literal source of, imagination and

therefore poetry itself, becomes central too. This is most important, for the search for what Guite calls a "theology of the imagination" is equally a search close-up as to how all poetry, poem by poem, can convey, elucidate, and even instil, Christian faith directly. The book is in no way overtly evangelical; this should be made clear; rather it suggests ways in which critical response is only fully possible by at least partly engaging with these considerations on their own terms.

Malcolm Guite is himself a Cambridge college chaplain, poet and singer, saturated in both the material and its historical background, and a skilled and sensitive close-reader of poetry. He is very good on individual words, "darkling", "embosomed", "image" as verb, etc; but he concentrates less on local effect than on wider poetic structure; how a passage's shape enables indirection to reach direct truth. This comes out clearly in the two chapters immediately following the Introduction. In the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood* a double interlocking passage gets attention. For it is first the cross or "tree" itself that most feels the wounding and pain; "strong foes seized me, set me up for a spectacle"; and Christ then follows, but courageously and "constant in his purpose", which is to climb on to the rood and, as Guite suggests, embrace it, and nobly share in its condition. Such transfiguration takes the reader to the heart of the saviour's suffering by an unforgettable metonymic shift, and the crucifixion's redemptive efficacy reaches us in a way beyond the power of straight prose to render.

From *A Midsummer Night's Dream* we are then offered Theseus's famous speech on "the poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling", according to which the poet's pen "gives to airy nothing/ A local habitation and a name". This entails a similarly remarkable if rather different poetic reversal. For Theseus himself speaks unwittingly, seeing these vital truths as mere 'fantasies' and 'tricks', and his wife Hippolyta has to point out to him that actually it all "grows to something of great constancy". Touchstone's assertion in *As You Like It* that "the truest poetry is the most feigning"—Guite's chapter title here—is thus evinced, so that we are drawn into a gap, left by the poet, where we can't avoid stumbling across the real meaning ourselves. This again is a main way by which "imagination is truth-bearing", and poetry is what gets us there. In *The Tempest* it is appearance and reality that are fruitfully confounded. If human life itself is a mere stage play, as Prospero's great concluding speech suggests, the theological implications hardly need stating.

The next three chapters all centre on the theme of light. With Sir John Davies the light is what illuminates; it enables cognition. In his long poem *Nosce Teipsum*, the title a deliberate reference to the pagan in Socrates, reason and order in the world around us are explored as to how they must forever interrelate. Sight and perception are not passive faculties but active powers which engage with what they apprehend; and Guite sees Davies's poem, published in 1599, as in effect jumping the entire Enlightenment period and anticipating key movements in epistemology today. But it is the regular, easy

and so clear movement of the *abab* quatrain form—on which the light shines, we might say—in *Nosce Teipsum* by which the reader discovers that learning is possible.

In the chapter on Donne and Herbert two kinds of 'double vision'—a further subject-object theme—are well illustrated by the poems examined. In Donne's 'The Sun Rising', most dramatically the reversal is that between the pair of lovers in bed and the overpowering universality of the sun itself. The lovers, not the sun, become the world's epicentre, and thus does imagination, Christ-like, "incarnate the vast into the tiny" (page 110), as—we are now gradually realising—only imagination can. Herbert's play is on glass, and here Guite perceptively ties two poems together. For in "The Elixir", the "man that looks on glass" may "stay his eye" on it, or instead "through it pass and then the heavens espy"; a different doubling though from the *stained* glass of the other poem, "The Windows". Just as, by the process of annealing, the colour becomes one with the glass itself, so too "to become a Christian is to realise that Christ's story, which is also history, is our story too" (119). With Milton the changes are rung further. In the famous opening invocation to light at the start of *Paradise Lost* Book III, it is Milton's own hampering lack of eyesight and the inner light he turns to instead that enables him to "see and tell/Of things invisible to mortal sight". Here, as firmly as anywhere in the book, bodily limit is what paradoxically releases imagination into rendering theological truth, and "justify[ing] the ways of God to men".

Coleridge gets a chapter to himself. It is so packed with insight and suggestion that a cursory summary will have to suffice. Nine highly illustrative pages on "Frost at Midnight" are followed by a beautiful section on the moon in 'The Ancient Mariner' and elsewhere. The moon is nearer to us than all other heavenly bodies, and unlike the overpowering sun it is transparent, soft-focused, and rather homely. So, again as with Herbert's glass, we can look at it direct, or through its watery light to what we are called upon to transcend. The moon thus emerges as a central analogy for and indeed source of imagination itself. Sections ensue on Shakespeare, "himself a nature humanised" as Coleridge put it; on Coleridge's own poems, which "awaken the mind's attention" to parts of the world otherwise missed; and on the Imagination-Fancy chapter 13 of the *Biographia Literaria*. Here, says Guite, Coleridge singlehandedly saw off Newton and Locke and defined imagination for the Romantic era in a way which is still with us. Such is Coleridge's massive importance.

To then select Hardy, Larkin and Geoffrey Hill as representatives of the twentieth century, rather than such as T S Eliot, David Jones and R S Thomas, might seem surprising. But Hardy, Larkin and Hill stand in precisely as "poets who professed *not* to be Christians" (179, Guite's emphasis), another of the intriguing choices which typify this book's flair for spotting unexpected new angles. Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush", Larkin's "Church Going" and Hill's sonnet sequence *Lachrymae* all fruitfully contradict and turn back on

themselves; yet more examples of transfiguration in action. Both Hardy's and Larkin's poems begin with objective renderings of their subjects, but end with each poet seeing more in their own starting stances than at first they had thought possible. Hill's sequence begins with the poet addressing Christ direct and in disbelief; "you do not dwell in me nor I in you", but ends with Christ now seeking out Hill himself, who responds, "'tomorrow I shall wake to welcome him'"—yet with that too, with the line enclosed in quotation marks, entailing a further enmeshing ambiguity.

Sadly I must pass over Seamus Heaney, subject of the book's last and longest chapter, and in Guite's view a major figure indeed. I confess to something of a blind spot here; Heaney to me is a most gifted poet whose work, however, is somehow unresolved, his soft-voiced verses too often drifting into comment on his own poetic progress. Readers will decide for themselves. But we are left then to assess what the book has achieved overall. The paid-up Eng. Lit. Crit professional may be occasionally disconcerted; much is "excellent", "brilliant", "beautiful"—not to mention "amazing", "astonishing", "wonderful" and "miraculous"—it might seem too often routinely. And how *does* "light" cause poetry close-up actually to work? What *is* it in Donne's trebly-witty lines, "Thy beams, so reverend, and strong/ Why shouldst thou think?/ I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink/ But that I would not lose her sight so long", that makes us call it "poetry" in its very essence? But this is doubtless to cavil. In the main the book offers a remarkable new line on what are commonly called "inter-disciplinary studies". Of course the single-poet commentaries will and must continue. But it may be that the main literary-critical enterprise, often thought of as a rogue discipline with no epistemological base of its own (don't we always leave aesthetics to the philosophers?) works most authentically when linked with some other cognitive area to anchor criticism's more wandering *ad hoc* perceptions. The current theology-literature detente is such an example; and Malcolm Guite's book is a most compelling read, to Coleridgeans, and to Christians and non-Christians alike.