

**Charlotte Clutterbuck**, *Encounters with God in Medieval and Early Modern English Poetry*. Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005, pp. 226, ISBN 075465270X (Hbk). Review doi: 10.1558/arsr.v21i2.246.

'The purpose of this book', says the author, 'is to examine how four English poems or groups of poems—the anonymous medieval Crucifixion lyrics, William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, John Donne's *Divine Poems*, and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*—use language to construct [a] sense of encounter with God' (pp. 1-2).

This thorough work of scholarship engages with major recent criticism but escapes being trapped in any theoretical school. In comparing the poets, Clutterbuck does not suggest an upward historical poetic evolution. Indeed, a downward direction is implied. The encounters with God become more frustrating and less personal. Milton fares poorly in this regard compared to the medieval lyricists.

Clutterbuck's premise is that Christian poetry is always an expression of a seeking for God. It seems to this reader that it may also express thankfulness for God having sought the poet. But given her presupposition, the arguments are consistent and, to me, enjoyable, because, as in Langland's phrase with which the book begins, I agree that 'grammar is the ground of all'.

She uses both traditional grammar and Halliday's functional grammar, showing how diction and syntax actually work towards an 'encounter with God'. The hard work of examining the details of the language—the theological and personal significance of tense, for example—results in a study more helpful than the many which concentrate on the supposed cultural construction of a poetic position. The occasional tendency to consider the poem, instead of Christ, as a mediation between God and man, is countered by the intriguing suggestion of the *failure* of language as the prevention of blasphemy (pp. 15-16), which could be another entire study.

The chapter 'Redemption and Response in the Anonymous Middle Ages' concerns the medieval crucifixion lyrics. Clutterbuck is helpful in discussing medieval theologies of the Cross. She shows how poems differ from pictures of the Crucifixion because the reader as the 'I' can speak with a speaking Christ. She contrasts the narrative movement of medieval plays with the timelessness of the lyrics. The scope of her book allows the reader to see that Milton's much later *Parliament of Heaven* has its origins in the debate between justice and mercy in the medieval lyrics.

Aspects of the next chapter, 'Finding the Balance in the C-revision of *Piers Plowman*' may be a little off-putting for the non-specialist reader confronted with frequent references to A, B and C revisions. The theological discussion, though, is clear and interesting, as is the consideration of allegory, confession, apocalyptic, and satire and their relation to a troubled fourteenth century. Langland's concern for the daily life of the poor is contrasted with the matter of much other poetry. As throughout the book, the careful study of grammar and prosody is useful. For example, Christ's suffering in C. XX. 46-53 is presented by Christ being made the object of active verbs, by words of suffering at stress-points and by harsh alliteration (p. 99). Langland is shown to contrast faith, grace and mercy with hope, works and justice (p. 57), and truth and righteousness with mercy and peace (p. 100). 'How may I save my soul?' depressingly 'remain[s] without a final answer' (p. 109), although later, the 'encounters with God' of Donne and Milton are considered to be more sterile than Langland's.

'Donne's Seeker and the Anguish of Desire' is a thoughtful and close analysis of Donne's 'Satyre III', 'Goodfriday, Riding Westward', and his 'Holy Sonnets and Hymnes'. Readers may not agree, however, that Donne 'showed his discomfort with the process of writing religious poems' by his 'convoluted syntax...hectic tone...ragged rhythms... marked voltas and multiple caesuras' (p. 202), because these are characteristics of his

secular poetry also. The author finds 'a spiritual tension between the idea of God (who is present in the lexis) and the Seeker's inability to be united with him (conveyed in the syntax)' (p. 124). The narrative direction of the poems is brought in as a third element, one which 'suggests that faith and desire are ultimately stronger than fear and doubt' (p. 139). I would have liked a comment on the biblical basis of the poems; the work rather implies that the God of the poems is of Donne's imagining. The question of sincerity, when a witty poem presents an agonizing problem, is insufficiently explored: the word-play in 'A Hymne to God my Father' implies cool detachment, yet the subject-matter is the possibility that its speaker might never be forgiven. Clutterbuck does say 'Donne avoids closure...there is always a gap between the Seeker's desire and the certainty of God's response' (p. 147); but 'always' is debatable, because, as Beverly Flanigan is quoted as saying (p. 134), the end of Sonnet VII, for example, is ironic, jokey, because Christ *has* sealed the speaker's pardon with His blood.

In 'Alienation from God in *Paradise Lost*' (Chapter 5), Clutterbuck argues for a hubristic yet guilty Poet, alienated from God, whose 'song pursues not God, but "things"' (p. 155), and who 'deliberately marr[ed]' the last two books (p. 202). God is not seen as Pursuer, initiating salvation, but as unsuccessfully pursued. Three flaws in *Paradise Lost* are identified: it is a narrative about God instead of a prayer to God; God speaks within that narrative; two Persons of the Godhead speak to one another (p. 164). Her solution is to separate the Poet from the Believer. She equates 'Believer' with 'Seeker', which is acceptable in the temporality of the epic in which 'the Redemption remains a distant future promise' (p. 196). Milton's Athens–Jerusalem conflicts are well defined: 'the true anguish of the poem [is] that [the] poetic endeavor may be sinful' (p. 163). She finds Milton's God self-righteous (though surely God alone *can* be truly 'self-righteous?') and rightly points out that division in the Godhead between a just Father and a merciful Son is unbiblical (and this might have been said concerning *Piers Plowman* also), perceptively adding that 'it is only from the point of view of the sinner that God has...conflicting aspects such as justice and mercy'. The epic form, to Bakhtin 'completed, congealed', Clutterbuck considers 'irreparably harmed' by Milton's 'sinful Poet' (p. 190). Devotionally, Milton 'distances the Passion at three removes': the Poet says what Michael says what God says (pp. 191-92). She points out that the pain of the Cross is treated cursorily (pp. 192-93)—though to be fair to Milton, it is medieval artists and preachers, not the biblical writers, who dwell on Christ's sufferings.

*Encounters with God* charts a movement away from 'salvation through direct encounter with God' (p. 197). Clearly written and structurally easy to follow, it is a needed study today, particularly methodologically. A work which gives understanding of the actual language of the text grammatically, prosodically and rhetorically is more refreshing than many a study of context and culture.

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