

## REVIEWS

EUROPEAN LITERATURE AND THE LATIN MIDDLE AGES. By E. R. Curtius, translated from the German by W. R. Trask. (Routledge and Kegan Paul; 3 ss.)

When the German original of this massive work came out in 1948 it was widely hailed as a masterpiece. Far-ranging yet packed with detail, it has also the merit—unusual, so the story goes, in books by German professors—of being neither heavy nor obscure. This professor at least has a mind as tidy as it is erudite. He seems, at every point, to know exactly what he wants to say and how to say it concisely. He possesses his learning. His prose is crisp, unhurried, urbane and flavoured with an occasional dry jest: qualities retained in the translation.

The purpose, too, of the book is attractively humane. As the author says in a foreword written for this translation, 'my book is not the product of purely scholarly interests . . . it grew out of a concern for the preservation of Western culture. It seeks to serve an understanding of the Western cultural tradition in so far as it is manifested in literature. . . . In the intellectual chaos of the present it has become necessary, and happily not impossible, to demonstrate that unity' (of the Western tradition). The demonstration assumes the 'universal standpoint' of Latinity. 'Latin was the language of the educated during the thirteen centuries between Virgil and Dante.' Note those terms 'unity' and 'literature'. The aim is to show the continuity of all Western literature; the method, a close study of the whole millenium between St Jerome and Dante—that 'middle' age once regarded as culturally a long twilight and which even now, after so much revision of our concept of the Renaissance, still gets small attention from most students of literary history, so far, at least, as the Latin substance of its culture is concerned. Compared with her vernacular daughters medieval Latin is neglected; and this neglect, Curtius thinks, has a bad effect on culture generally. His conviction dates from the early thirties when Germany's trend to barbarism provoked him to start exploring the paths that lead back from Dante through the Latin centuries, searching for the foundations of 'a new Humanism which should integrate the Middle Ages'.

Yet it is not clear on what philosophy, if any, Curtius rests his Humanism. He is not, one surmises, a Catholic. In medieval philosophy and theology, in the strict sense, he seems only mildly interested, and is certainly no expert. Of course he has read the Fathers and some Scholastic authors, but his familiarity with all that tradition is not, I think, thorough. And this is surely a defect, given his expressed aim in writing. For Scholasticism is also a literary phenomenon, as Père

Chenu in particular has demonstrated; and that this fine scholar's name gets no place in Curtius's Index suggests that the latter has still something to learn about his subject; while a couple of supercilious pages on 'Thomism and poetry' suggest that here he is unaware of his limitations. One may add that on Dante, the single figure who bulks largest in his pages, Curtius, though enthusiastic and well-informed ('Petrarch and Boccaccio . . . are both interesting, but Dante is great'), is not, on the whole, a very safe guide.

However, the great merits of this work far outweigh its faults. Within its limits—and they are not narrow—it has authority. It will be widely and respectfully consulted as a sort of dictionary of medieval culture, to the understanding of which (so far as this was a *literary* culture with inherited mental patterns and images and habits of reading and writing) it provides a magnificent introduction. But it should be criticized as well as used.

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

MEDIEVAL ESSAYS. By Christopher Dawson. (Sheed and Ward; 16s.)

All except four of these essays have been published before, but brought together with the new matter in this volume they form a most suggestive outline of what 'the study of Christian culture', the subject of the first, hitherto unpublished essay, ought to involve. Christianity may underlie many cultural patterns, and will provide a background colour for them all, but in these essays Mr Dawson is concerned with the development of medieval Europe under the impact of Christianity, because it is there that we find the most fully developed Christian culture, in as much as the highest culture of the Middle Ages was also an expression of the Christian religion.

The range of Mr Dawson's essays is very wide and the learning displayed immense, but there is no difficulty in seeing the underlying unity, for in the political organization of Western Europe in the Middle Ages, in its sociology, its science, and its literature, the Catholic Faith exercised a profound influence. On all these subjects Mr Dawson has illuminating and arresting things to say, but perhaps one of the most valuable contributions to our understanding of the period is the light he throws on the culture of Western Islam and its effect in the Christian world in science and literature. In the essay on 'The Romantic Tradition' he argues that the courtly love poetry of Provence derived its origin from Moslem Spain. The thesis must be accepted, I think, but it is still too little known in this country, and it is good that the essay should be reprinted. This alien element in medieval life came to have an influence far beyond the limited sphere into which it was originally introduced. It infused that quality which we imply by the