

REVIEWS

T.S. ELIOT AND MYSTICISM: The Secret History of *Four Quartets* by Paul Murray. Macmillan, London, 1991. Pp.xiv + 326. £40.

Paul Murray, who belongs to the Irish Province of the Dominicans, has published two books of poems: *Rites and Meditations* was awarded Poetry Ireland Choice. With years of study and teaching of mystical theology (at Tallaght and in Rome) as well as his skills as a poet he is well qualified to offer these readings of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* as 'meditative verse'. It is not just that he knows far more about mysticism than most previous commentators. He has also had access to the Eliot archives in Cambridge, with permission to quote unpublished material, and is able to demonstrate the range and depth of Eliot's interest in mysticism, which started in his student days. The main thing, however, is not that themes and sources may be traced to mystical writers but that the 'essential method' of the verse itself is *meditative*.

There have been many attempts over the years to locate the metaphysical character of Eliot's poem, all the way from treating it as part of his Harvard doctoral thesis on F.H. Bradley (which Murray mentions only once) to protesting that any old rope is the best material for poetry. By far the most impressive of these attempts, in Paul Murray's judgement, is an essay by Morris Weitz (not Weiz, as he persistently says), originally published in *The Sewanee Review* in 1952 (just at the time, incidentally, when Weitz's philosophical outlook was about to be revolutionized by his encounter with Wittgenstein's *Investigations*, which led in due course to some important work in aesthetics). Against readers who related 'Burnt Norton' to Bergson or Heraclitus, Weitz demonstrated that Eliot's 'philosophy of time' was essentially Christian Neo-Platonist. Murray does not discuss the two Heraclitus fragments which Eliot chose as the epigraph for 'Burnt Norton' and then for *Four Quartets* as a whole. Perhaps they have no bearing on his mysticism or his conception of time, although the second ('The way up and down is one and the same') is connected in the ancient commentaries with cyclical notions of human and cosmic destiny, and thus (one might have thought) with time. It might even, as Derek Traversi claimed, have something to do with the affirmative and the negative ways in the spiritual life. Bergson, however, seems to be Eliot's opponent, so to speak, in the opening lines of the poem. He believed that the important thing is to allow oneself to be lulled by 'the uninterrupted humming of life's depths'. Eliot, who heard Bergson lecture in Paris in 1911, reacts strongly against any such view. 'If all time is eternally present', as Bergson held, then of course 'All time is unredeemable' - which a Christian cannot accept. As Murray shows, Eliot greatly admired the work of three mystical theologians: Richard of St Victor, Denys the Areopagite and St Augustine. Picking up a phrase from

Louis Martz (not Marz!), he argues that Eliot's 'meditative verse' is shaped by the traditional art of meditation about which he was not only very well informed but into which he had initiated himself through years of discipline: 'an application, not only of the mind, not only of the sensibility, but of the whole being', in Eliot's own words.

It is not just that 'Burnt Norton' yields more sense the more one knows about the themes with which the poet is dealing (a particular notion of time, then). The point is rather that how the poetry *moves* is an invitation into an imaginative process, into a kind of *music*, in which a brief moment of illumination is attained—'But the experience is, for some reason, unbearable for Eliot, and it is only partly realised' (page 53).

Murray recalls the experience shared by Augustine and his mother (*Confessions*, book 10), looking out of a window into the enclosed garden at Ostia. The experience of Eliot's protagonist is, he says, 'much more hesitant and more subjectively self-conscious'. True—but could this not be because he never had the experience in the first place? Footfalls echo in the memory all right, but down the passage which we did *not* take, towards the door we *never* opened.

Of course much else emerges as Paul Murray guides us through the four poems. He quotes Goethe's remark to Eckermann: 'Thoughts that are the same as our own leave us unmoved; but it is contradiction that makes us productive'. All the new information and insight which this book provides surely settles the relationship between the poetry and Eliot's mysticism once and for all, beyond contradiction; but the author's scholarship, sympathy and enthusiasm send us back to the poems, eager to verify his readings, more free than ever to make the poetry our own.

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SHEER JOY: CONVERSATIONS WITH THOMAS AQUINAS ON CREATION SPIRITUALITY, by Matthew Fox. *Harper Collins*, New York, 1992. Pp. xviii + 532. \$18.00/£11.99.

This book aims to 'resurrect Aquinas from the dead' and to rescue him from being remembered 'solely by an academic elite who specialize in obscure rationalistic nitpicking' (p.1). Aquinas, says Fox, 'has suffered long enough from persons interpreting him without heart, without cosmology, without wisdom, without mysticism' (p. 10). He needs to be read 'with right and left brain, with heart and head' (*ibid*).

After a fifty-five page Introduction, Fox offers four 'conversations' between himself and Aquinas. Centered on 'the Four Paths of creation spirituality', these are intended to be 'a treatise on spirituality in Aquinas's own words' (p.11). In them Fox offers translations of Aquinas's writings in a format which will enable 'late twentieth-century minds and hearts to hear him in a fresh way' (p.2)—i.e. the translations are extracts from Aquinas selected by Fox and reproduced with interjections from