

Reviews

GOD'S SPIES: MICHELANGELO, SHAKESPEARE AND OTHER POETS OF VISION by Paul Murray *OP*, T&T Clark, London, pp. ix + 178, £81.00, hbk

Paul Murray has taught the literature of the mystical tradition for many years in Rome at the Pontifical University of St Thomas (PUST), better known as the Angelicum. He has published five books of verse, one every ten years since *Ritual Poems* (1971), as well as a dozen books on a range of subjects most notably *T.S. Eliot and Mysticism: The Secret History of the Four Quartets* (1991) and *Aquinas at Prayer: The Bible, Mystery and Poetry* (2013). Now, in this immensely erudite, formidably footnoted set of studies, Fr Murray explores the religious dimension of the imagination of a diverse gathering of 'visionary' poets.

The title comes from Lear's final poignant speech to Cordelia, unrealistically reassuring her that they will live happily in prison, with plenty to do and keep them amused, while more seriously they will contemplate 'the mystery of things' as if with God's eyes, seeing all in a religious perspective.

Of course the paradigm of visionary poetry in religious perspective is Canto XXXIII of the *Paradiso*, which we get to in the last chapter. The book opens, however, with *The Canticle of the Creatures*, the natural world seen in God's eyes by Francis of Assisi, startlingly new at the time, though comparable with the nature poetry of the early Irish hermit-monks, as Murray first shows.

In Chapter 2 we see how Shakespeare, in 3 *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, particularly in the soliloquies, portrays a 'human casualty' in the figure of Richard Crookback: a misshapen human being who turns his sense of victimhood into monstrously victimizing others. How wrong things can go in a life, and why, is depicted imaginatively in Shakespeare's dramatic art.

Chapter 3 presents the major poems of Charles Péguy (1873-1914), greatly admired by T.S. Eliot and Geoffrey Hill, which are composed as if they were in something like the colloquial language of the gospels (the translator of *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope* is David L. Schindler, not Daniel as in the Acknowledgements).

Chapter 4 reminds us, perhaps informs many of us for the first time, that, as well as being an architect, a sculptor, and a painter, Michelangelo was also a poet. Admittedly his great-nephew's 'bowdlerized' edition concealed them until late in the nineteenth century. His principal theme, approached from several different angles, is 'prodigious beauty' (pp. 86–93).

An observant Catholic all his life, one of his brothers was a Dominican. This chapter concludes by citing an appreciative assessment of Michelangelo's Christ-centred piety in an essay by Kenelm Foster OP in this journal (September 1963).

Chapter 5 tracks how the impact of the Passion on the natural order has been registered in literature since the earthquake noted in the Gospel of *Matthew* (27: 51–52). Without being exhaustive the catalogue runs from Ephrem the Syrian, Melito of Sardis, Blathmac mac Con Brettan, Romanos the Melodist, to *'The Dream of the Rood'*, by way of Joseph Mary Plunkett and Simone Weil.

Chapter 6 returns to Shakespeare. While acknowledging the lively debate since Ted Hughes identified him as 'shaman of old Catholicism', Murray highlights the Christian themes in the greatest plays, but holds back from regarding him as a religious dramatist or a secret papist. The chapter concludes with G.K. Chesterton 'in rare form', finding in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* a 'mysticism of happiness', with Bottom the Weaver 'greater and more mysterious than Hamlet' (p. 145).

In the concluding chapter poetry and Christian faith unite completely in Canto XXXIII of the *Paradiso* ('I fixed my eyes/on that alone in rapturous contemplation'). But we are not done. Others besides Dante have given us works of art inspired by Christianity. Helped by the translation by the late Seamus Heaney (1983) Fr Murray summons a work 'which happens to be one of the finest literary achievements of medieval Ireland' (p. 163) — namely, *Buile Shuibhne* (The Frenzy of Sweeney). Anonymous, dated to the twelfth century at the earliest, agreed to be composed in beautifully rich Irish, it is the story of a king who insults a bishop who curses him with the result that for the rest of his life he is always in flight, eventually becoming a Bird Man. Mad and restlessly on the move Sweeney is given 'lyrics of manifest delight', 'a manifest joy in the natural world' (p. 166), as Heaney's translation persuasively conveys.

In the closing postscript Fr Murray lists several more poets whom he might have included but those presented in this beautifully written, compelling and original book shows that 'poets of vision' continue to reveal to us 'the mystery of things'. (The publisher has announced a paperback edition.)

FERGUS KERR OP

GALATIANS [Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture] by Cardinal Albert Vanhoye and Peter S. Williamson, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2019, pp. 224, \$21,99, pbk

The 'Catholic Commentary' series seeks to combine, according to its publisher's website, 'the best of contemporary biblical scholarship' with 'the rich treasury of the Church's tradition'. This is obviously a laudable