

VII'? Do the *Monarchy* and the *Comedy* really show 'the same sense of mission?' But Limentani knows all the moves in this argument.

Dr J. Cremona's essay on Dante's views on language is a clear survey of what intensive research has brought to light in recent years. To the beginner the oddest part of Dante's beliefs about Italian and Latin is that Latin is not the parent of the vernacular, but the other way round, a construction on the basis of a vernacular. In the Latin of the *de VE* Dante declared that the vernacular is nobler, and in the Italian of the *Convivio* that Latin is superior in nobility, virtue and beauty.

Dr (soon to be Professor at Edinburgh) C. P. Brand, author of books on the Italian Influence on the English Romantics and on Tasso (with a final section on his influence in England), contributes a discursive but interesting highlighting of what Dante has meant to different periods and to a number of English poets, as patriot and philosopher and reformer as well as poet of love and hate, and as theoretician of language to Coleridge. Too many Englishmen seem not to have got as far as the *Paradiso* (p. 180).

COLIN G. HARDIE

PRE-REFORMATION ENGLISH SPIRITUALITY. Edited and introduced by James Walsh, S.J. *Burns and Oates*, pp xiv, 288, 30s.

The useful biographical and bibliographical notes to this anthology of articles about English spiritual authors make interesting reading. For one thing the majority of the works referred to have been written during or since the last world war (this of course includes modern editions of the medieval texts); and another point of some significance is that quite a number of the seventeen authors of these essays served in the armed forces during that war. If the turbulent times of the fourteenth century threw up its great mystical writers, so it seems has the disturbed and revolutionary period of the mid-twentieth century forced a great number of people to turn to these early masters of contemplation for some permanent foothold in the Christian life.

But of course this anthology provides a surer foothold than the fourteenth century English mystics with their highly specialized and individualistic approach. It takes the reader from the eighth century Bede right up to Thomas More and Augustine Baker, revealing a tradition which is perhaps characteristically English, but in its total stretch not quite so characteristically insular as some of the later writers would suggest. Another point of interest in the biographical notes is that Professor E. J. Arnould, who contributes the essay on Richard Rolle, came to his researches into the writing of that mystic through lecturing on Anglo-Norman literature. One of the proofs that this tradition was not broken by the Norman invasion lies in the continuity of the English vernacular right up to More. The foundation of this study of English spirituality was really laid by Professor R. W.

Chambers, earlier this century, in his brief outline *On the Continuity of English Prose*. A great deal of this prose was religious in nature, written for the edification of the nuns and laity of the times, so that as they learnt to express their love of God in their prayers, they were preparing the way for the unrivalled vernacular of the Authorised Version.

We must however be careful to avoid insularity. Mr Donald Nicholl, at the very beginning of the volume, has some apropos phrases about St Bede: 'There is a sense in which it is misguided . . . to speak of *his* mystical teaching at all. For though he was a teacher he was at every instant conscious of being a Catholic teacher, whose duty is to come ever closer to the mind of the Catholic Church . . . When a person, in fear and trembling, assumes the office of teacher and begins to announce Catholic truth to the unlearned, he must above all things avoid giving to that teaching some special interpretation of his own'. English spirituality is Christian, Catholic spirituality, if it be genuine, but expressed in the English idiom. It will be found to be the same as that of the early Christians in the middle-east and the Roman Christians on the continent – at any time in the past two thousand years.

The essays have first appeared as articles in *The Month*; and there is inevitably some lack of balance. Hilton and More receive the same length of treatment as William Flete and Margery Kempe. Edmund Colledge O.S.A. makes out a good case for the authenticity of the latter case despite her early madness; and she is of undoubted interest as a manifestation

of one of the diverse ways in which the Spirit works. But she can hardly rank with Hilton or the author of *The Cloud* as a master with nationwide and continuing influence. It is a great pleasure however to find Edmund Colledge appearing more than once in these pages and perhaps one of the most fruitful and original contributions are his two articles on 'Early English Religious Literature'. It is to be hoped that he may develop this contribution into a

volume of its own, now that he has returned to the world of authorship.

The volume will provide a great deal of nutrition for those of this country who are hungering for some solid food of spirituality amidst the rather lighter and often indigestible fare offered them in the present turmoil of liturgical change.

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

SIMONE WEIL. A SKETCH FOR A PORTRAIT. by Richard Rees. *Oxford University Press*, 30s.

This is an age of inflated reputations, whether of pop singers or of agnostic bishops, in which oddity of thought or behaviour is vastly more admired than sweet reasonableness. Simone Weil benefits from this craze for craziness, for both her thought and her behaviour were very odd, indeed, hence books on her are still pouring from the presses. This latest publication consists of two parts, the first a biographical essay, the second a kind of précis of her thought, both being written from what may be called the hagiographical point of view, which admits of practically no defects in the subject. The biographical part is very poor indeed and gives no clear picture of her life, in this respect it is far inferior to Jacques Cabaud's biography of her. The second part is better, being a fairly adequate presentation of her thought, which is by no means easy to understand and even more difficult to summarize in intelligible form.

The author contends that Simone Weil 'was an intellectual who believed that genius means humility in the sphere of thought' and represents her as such. But what must strike the unprejudiced reader of this as of most other books by and about her is the incredible and almost naive conceit with which she proffered advice and opinions on a amazing variety of subjects, philosophical, sociological, political, religious. So she writes to the blind Dominican, Father Perrin: 'The Church is in fact for you . . . also an earthly fatherland. You live in an atmosphere of human warmth. That makes a little attachment almost inevitable. Such an attachment is perhaps for you that infinitely fine thread of which St John of the Cross speaks, which, so long as it is not broken, holds the bird down to the ground . . . I imagine that the last thread, although very fine, must be the hardest to cut . . . But all the same the obligation is imperative. The children of God ought not to have any other fatherland here below

except the universe itself, with the totality of all the reasoning creatures it ever has contained, contains, or ever will contain. That is the native city to which we owe our love'.

In this quotation we have Simone Weil, as it were in a nutshell, with all her intellectual pride and the absurdity of her ideas. No doubt St John of the Cross would have been extremely surprised at this interpretation of his advice on detachment.

Apart from the impertinence of an agnostic young woman giving Father Perrin a piece of unasked-for spiritual direction, the whole idea that the true Christian ought not to have any other attachments than the universe is complete nonsense. How can any man love the universe with all rational creatures past, present and to come as his 'native city'? Jesus commanded us to love our neighbour, not rational creatures who may live somewhere in the universe a million years hence.

This does not mean that Simone Weil had no sympathy with her neighbour – she had; but being the impractical intellectual and fanatic she was she showed it in ways that irritated rather than helped, so for example when she had managed to get herself taken on to assist in the grape harvest, but inconvenienced the whole household 'through her determination to make herself uncomfortable'. She imagined that the workers with whom she tried to live were suffering from intellectual starvation, 'attributing for abstract thought to people entirely lacking it and mystifying them by her attempts to interest them in ideas which they found meaningless'.

There can be no doubt that Simone Weil was an extraordinarily gifted person, but she had little knowledge of ordinary human beings, or she could not have written: 'Every human being who suffers will find some relief, if he has ever so little elevation of mind, when he con-