

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Toby Davidson, *Christian Mysticism and Australian Poetry* (Cambria Press, 2013)

The idea that poets may find a voice in mysticism should not be, on reflection, an alien concept. Both poets and mystics strive to express that which can never be expressed totally because it must also be experienced. St Teresa of Avila alludes to divine intimacy, which is often accompanied by holy intoxication, leading her to speak folly in a thousand holy ways.

Davidson's book, developed from his 2008 Doctoral thesis 'Born of Fire, Possessed by Darkness: Mysticism and Australian Poetry', seeks to show how the Western Christian mystic tradition has influenced a number of poets. The poets featured in this volume draw on the works of the Spanish mystics, St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila, Christian texts and spiritual writings, striving to reconcile the contemplative and the contemporary

Mysticism ranges over a number of beliefs and philosophies. It is not confined to Christian teaching, but the author has wisely confined his study to Western Christian Mysticism, defined as 'the direct, experimental, or unitive expression of Christ, God, or Godhead transcending regular modes of knowledge and language' (8). Davidson distinguishes between mystical poets who are not mystics but who demonstrate mystical expression, and mystic poetry which refers to 'the rare and fine cases of poetry written by established Christian mystics' (8). Nor are all the Australian poets who are examined in depth in this volume Christians. What he does set out to demonstrate is the development of Australian mystical poetry from his earliest example, Ada Cambridge, to the work of indigenous poets. Prior to the individual chapters dealing with these writers, Davidson has written a general introduction entitled 'Cross-currents and Precedents', which looks at the Colonial period, Post-Federation and Postwar, this being World War II. In this overview he traces the strong influence of Anglican traditions and the English poets, such as Wordsworth, to a closer identification with Australian people and conditions, and finally to a reemergence of saints and scholars. A number of poets are mentioned and quoted, including Christopher Brennan, James McAuley and A.D. Hope. While these poets do not have individual chapters on their work their influence is acknowledged.

This book enriches our study of Australian poetry in three ways. Few Australian poetry scholars have examined their subject from a philosophical or theological theme and thus this book opens up a new avenue for discussion. It brings some poets to the forefront who had previously been considered irrelevant or second-rate. The chief example is Ada Cambridge, who Davidson claims was Australia's first major mystical poet, despite being dismissed by her contemporaries as writing poems of 'insipid femininity' (55). The third strong positive in this book is the inclusion of Indigenous mystical poets.

John Shaw Neilson, who followed Ada Cambridge, was less influenced by her, not surprisingly given the lack of recognition of her worth, but he looked to Brennan, Yeats, and Hopkins. Neilson's poetry was an early influence on Francis Webb, Judith Wright and Kevin Hart. Thus Davidson traces a succession and progression linked to his earlier divisions of colonial, post-federation and postwar. Francis Webb was known throughout his life as a devotional Catholic poet, but it is only in more recent times that he has been seen as 'Australia's most prodigious mystical poet' (117). Davidson sees his work, as a search, and a journey. Davidson, who edited Webb's *Collected Poems* (2011) asserts that 'no Australian Christian mystical poet has yet matched the rigour and reach of Webb's search' (151).

Judith Wright was not a Christian yet her poetry incorporates the language and themes of the Western Christian mystics, and this aspect of her writing was acknowledged by others,

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such as A.D. Hope, Vincent Buckley (with reservations) and Kevin Hart. Wright's poetry abounds with references to water and light and grace, as in such poems as 'The Pool and the Star' or 'The Blind Man'.

It is Hart who combined a deep study of theology and philosophy and through his study of phenomenology has 'highlighted the convergences and divergences of mysticism, literature and Western philosophy from antiquity to postmodernity' (187). Davidson suggests that at times the eroticism in Hart's poetry reaches a carnal extreme; there is confusion between agape and Eros, even though so much of mystical poetry uses language and symbols that pertain to the sexual and erotic. Words and phrases that describe mystical union with the One, such as: 'I slept with you', 'you scrape my heart', 'you enter me', are, as Davidson writes, 'powerful images of erotic union' (210).

The mystical poetry of Indigenous Australians does not portray without reservation the Western Christian mysticism. Nor, given the treatment of these people, sometimes in the name of Christianity, is this surprising. The later poets treated in this section including Noonuccal, Kevin Gilbert, Maisie Cavanagh and John Muk Muk Burke, draw on a fusion of Christian teaching, their own Dreaming, and ancient philosophy. Their poetry is rooted in nature and the Spirit. Burke, in particular, straddles the traditions easily. As Donovan says, 'Burke's overt, explicit engagements with tropes of Western transcendence demonstrate how boldly Indigenous Christian mystical poetics of the twenty-first century may choose to draw upon European sources' (247).

The poets are well represented by their poetry in this book, making it possible even for readers who are not deeply into the study of Australian poetry to appreciate it. *Christian Mysticism and Australian Poetry* is part of the Cambria Studies in Australian Literature Series. As such it makes a fine contribution to the study of Australian poetry, one that throws a new light on the work of some of our most prominent poets.

Emily Sutherland