Foreword

One of the most valuable tasks that can be undertaken by Christian thinkers in our present time is the re-equipping of people's imaginations—helping Christians and non-Christians alike to have imaginations that are capable of responding to the divine dynamics of their reality. Today's Christianity may try to achieve this education of the imagination in various ways. It may find help by returning afresh to its sources in Scripture, liturgy and prayer. Or it may do so (and this is not incompatible with the first possibility) by renewing and deepening its relationship with other religious traditions and their practices. But just as promising as both of these must be the possibilities held out to theologians, preachers and teachers by the *arts*. Literary, visual, musical, architectural—each artistic form harbours particular resources for breaking open our set assumptions about the way the world is, and our functionalist reductionism about how we are to live well in it.

This sensitive and inspiring book chooses immersion in the literary arts, and especially the work of three modern poets, as the medium in which to develop its theological insights. The wonderful thing about the book is that it really *is* an immersion, and not a co-option of the poetry for merely illustrative or didactic purposes. In a way that is rare in theological dialogue with the arts, David Mahan respects the complex integrity of the poetry—both the generative strictures of its forms, and the seriousness of its intentions. He shows himself to be an exemplary reader of poems, with the contemplative's capacity to abide with material that is initially—so it seems—intractable to understanding. He can follow with patient attention the contours and sinews of the poetic worlds and figures that Charles Williams, Micheal O'Siadhail, and Geoffrey Hill conjure up. He appreciates the eloquence of the tiniest poetic manoeuvre deep in the text of these long poem cycles, and yet at the same time is capable of grasping the poetry's large vistas: the magnificence of Williams's vision of a sacramental imperium; O'Siadhail's determination to sustain an openness to the full horror of the Shoah by

honouring the voices of so great a multitude of its victims; Hill's highly-charged attention to the layered depths of Western history which make his poems like literary cross sections through countless geological strata (which are in fact *human* strata—with all their knots and twists, profane and religious, vicious and exalted) in order to lay open the fragile possibilities we have for responsible life *now*.

Why should the theologian pay any attention to the poet, at least in our present circumstances? The answer must begin with the fact that the poet can evoke *wonder*. The poet can bring conceptual concerns (which always remain to some extent merely schematic) back into contact with living, breathing, concrete reality. But at the same time, the poet can lift our relationship to this reality from the merely workaday to a new "pitch of attention" (Hill's words). In this moment, what would otherwise be related to as mundane can be seen as shot through with matters of existential import: matters like, for example, the place of faith and hope and love in our world, and in our life in the world.

As it happens, the triumvirate of poets considered here in this book are supremely good educators in how a certain pitch of attention may be achieved through perception and language. And faith, hope and love are allowed by them to be themes of overriding authority—not just because a religion tells them it should be, but because the world they scrutinise with their poetic sensibility *requires* faith, hope and love to be such themes. (Authority, after all, is not so much something we attribute to whatever we care to, as something we encounter that will not let us go.) Williams is a poet of visionary sight, of a seeing of the unseen, which is the characteristic of *faith*. O'Siadhail sets himself perhaps the hardest challenge to *hope* that we can imagine, as though to test whether and how it can be held to without untruthfulness. And Hill obliquely, but with fierce honesty, probes the durability and power of *love*.

None of these poets is glibly pious in the way he approaches these themes, religiously-freighted though they evidently are. The poets are too in touch with a world that experiences much darkness and asks many difficult questions: the modern world that is the Christian's too. Mahan implies that Christians may too readily have adopted strategies to evade the darkness and difficulty of modern experience; a sort of emotional and intellectual insulation. So another reason he commends the reading of this poetry (which, it must be admitted, is not the

accessible and undemanding fodder of much popular culture) is that it holds the religious mind back from naivety or complacency.

There is, however, more to make these poets Christianly-interesting than their themes—weighty though those themes are. There must be in any really open engagement between theology and the arts a readiness to learn from the *way the art-form works* and not just from *what it says*. The latter would inevitably risk a betrayal of the art form's particularity in the interests of a "translation," or even a "generalization," of some supposed core message. What Mahan does in this book is show us that the form cannot be dispensed with. The poets' concerns incarnate themselves in the forms of their poems, and any high view of incarnation requires that bodies be respected. The forms adopted by his poets, Mahan will argue, instruct us. They represent a discipline of sensitivity —a sensitivity that comes about in part by the simultaneously spare and adventurous use of language, by which expression can be at once exact and multivalent. They demonstrate the power of the careful disposal of words in order to summon, evoke, judge, and illuminate, with the result that any rendering into a different medium (a prose treatise, for example) would also be a loss. The demands imposed by the human tasks of perception and communication are met by this poetry in a way that Christians can learn from. And Mahan's view is that the area where this learning might pre-eminently take place is the area where Christians are most concerned to communicate well: the area of mission. So this book is a significant contribution to the sort of theology that Rowan Williams calls "communicative"—a theology that "experiments with the rhetoric of its uncommitted environment."

In the end, theology like Mahan's can "experiment" in such a way because it believes that the profoundest truths spoken about in Christian tradition are the profoundest truths of the world created by God, and thus also meditated upon by artists. There is an affirmation here of a doctrine of creation—a belief that there is a "grain" to the universe inhabited by believer and non-believer alike—such that those concerned to honour the God who made the heavens and the earth will prize good looking and good listening wherever they are found, and know they can receive insight from them. This is wisdom (the biblical genre in which poetry is most at home). But at the same time, the world of Christians and non-Christians alike is the world in need of *redemption*. The revelation of what God has done in Christ gives Christians a particular charge

to remind the world of this need, and not simply to concur with its self-assessments. But even here, they may be helped (through the critical exposure of the world's pain and wickedness by the poets who look at it) not to forget the full scope of what redemption means.

This book has learnt from its poets, and its author shares many of their virtues: he is an intensely responsible, careful, and faithful perceiver of a world he loves and has hope for. He invites us here to make the language of Christian apologetics more worthy of its subject matter, and this means also, more reciprocal, more nuanced, and more beautiful. May those who have ears to hear, hear.

—Ben Quash