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Lucid Mystics

THE OXFORD BOOK OF ENGLISH MYSTICAL VERSE. CHOSEN BY D. H. S. NICHOLSON AND A. H. E. LEE. (OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS; \$2.)

The slowly growing series of the Oxford Books of Verse has from its inception been one of the necessities of life to every lover of poetry. With the single exception of Palgrave's "Golden Treasury" no other anthologies of such uniformly high merit have been published. (In passing, let us express a fervent wish that the Delegates of the Clarendon Press may issue an "Oxford Book of American Verse" in recognition of our alliance with England.)

"The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse" maintains the standards set by its predecessors, but the reviewer of it faces one peculiar difficulty—that of definition. What *is* mystical verse? None but a German Doctor of Philosophy would dare attempt sharply to define it, especially when the editors of the collection frankly shirk the task. They say:

Our conception of mysticism must be found in the poetry we have gathered together. But it may serve as a ground for comprehension to say that in making our selection we have been governed by a desire to include only such poems and extracts from poems as contain intimations of a consciousness wider and deeper than the normal. This is the connecting link between them—the thread, as it were, on which the individual pieces are strung. It is less a question of a common subject than of a common stand-point and in some sense a common atmosphere, and the twin dangers of an uninspired piety on the one hand and mere intellectual speculation on the other. . .

When we abandon the hopeless effort at definition and turn to the contents of the book, we find selections from more than one hundred and fifty poets, ranging in date from Richard Rolle of Hampole to John Masefield and Alfred Noyes and in religion from Francis Thompson to Sarojimi Nayadu and Edward Carpenter. The distribution of the poems in point of time is interesting. Five-sixths of them—more than five-sixths, if we count

Blake among the nineteenth century poets—are the product of that nineteenth century which its own prophets denounced as materialistic and skeptical beyond all previous epochs, of this twentieth century which, we were told before the war, was wholly given over to fads and superficiality. Of the poems from earlier centuries which have been deemed worthy of a place in this collection, far more than half are the work of five men—Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, Vaughan, and Traherne. Contemplation of these facts awakens a dreadful qualm of doubt. Is it possible that we have overlooked some vital elements in our glib cataloging of nineteenth century tendencies; that even Early Victorian England is still too near at hand for its whole significance to be evident?

Sins of omission are the usual refuge of the reviewer of an anthology. Because the majority of the poems included are the work of men of established fame his fault-finding propensities are curbed; he lacks the courage to attack that which public opinion has pronounced good, and therefore pitches into the editors for omitting work which he himself has approved of. Such procedure would be especially easy in dealing with anything so indefinable as mystical verse—in fact, it is too easy to be worth doing. For the sake, however, of keeping up a useful tradition, we may express a slight surprise that no place has been found for Whittier among the American poets included. Emerson and Whitman are generously represented and there are characteristic poems by Madison Cawein, Bliss Carman, Father Tabb, and others. Among the work of living Englishmen we could wish that room had been made for Kipling's strange "Prayer of Miriam Cohen" and for more of G. K. Chesterton's work. His "Holy of Holies" is given, but we miss "The Beatific Vision" and other poems in which the most robust and controversial of modern mystics declares his faith.

The thought of Chesterton awakens us to a realization of the most remarkable feature of most of the poems in this collection—their clarity. Their mystical quality is due to elevation of thought, not to woolly-mindedness. Some poets are vague and mysterious simply because they cannot or will not think clearly, but most of the writers here represented are as lucid and unconfused as St. Paul himself. Only rarely—notable in Aleister Crowley's "The Quest," every stanza of which requires at least one footnote to explain its symbolic meaning—do we feel that the poet is overdoing the thing. The true mystic can make his vision plain without footnotes.

For the present reviewer the reading of this volume has had at least one permanent result. A vague impression as to the identity of the two greatest lyrics—other than elegies—in the English language has been changed to a certainty. Every poem in this collection is thoughtful and sincere, many are in the highest sense inspired, but the two which tower above every rival as Shakespeare towers above all other English dramatists are the "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" and "The Hound of Heaven." After rereading them in direct comparison with all the best English verse of a similar nature, we lay the book aside with the conviction not only that they represent the highest flight of sustained lyric inspiration in nineteenth century poetry but that they are the most perfect religious poems in the whole range of our literature.

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