

THE MISSION OF THE PEN

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THE re-publication of Miss Waterhouse's symposium of prose and poetry,¹ a 'little bundle of thoughts' as she herself calls it, takes for granted the relationship between literature and life. When this book was first published in 1902 it was still fairly widely agreed that literature and any form of art did touch human life and should be expected to touch human life at many points. Although Walter Pater and many like him had lived and written, the 'Art for Art's Sake' creed had not borne its full fruit. Now almost fifty years later this same book sees the light again in a world that thinks very differently. Today it is commonly taken for granted that poetry exists primarily in its own right and may *only* be judged on its own terms. It was indeed very necessary after the excess of 'moral' literary criticism to re-establish the natural rights of poetry. But too much blame has been attached to Matthew Arnold and his school of 'moral' critics, and the pendulum has now swung the other way; and today he will be a brave critic who dares to claim that poetry exists for man to do him good not only by giving him pleasure but by improving his character, his mind, and his will. How poetry will do this is another matter altogether, and one about which there will be a much larger field of legitimate discussion. By and large, of course, it is very necessary to keep a balance between didactic moralising and pure agnosticism. It is always difficult to discover why the poets write poetry, and while it would be rash to say that no good poet ever wrote because he wanted to better mankind (remember Keats's ideal that poetry might become co-extensive with life and 'every human being might become great'), it is true too that much concern about 'doing good' often dumbfounds the Muse, and some of the greatest poets—Shakespeare and Chaucer, for instance—were the least concerned with 'moral betterment'. But on the other hand, unless the poet has a view of life to which he must be faithful, his metres will be as empty as those of the didactic moralist.

A similar situation faces the reader of poetry, for his exercise is generally the same as that of the writer of poetry: is he to expect truth or merely entertainment? Though Miss Waterhouse's book cannot be described as weighted with moral purpose, perhaps it will do a little to restore a true perspective where it is needed. In a post-Christian world it is more than usually necessary that we should be able to

1 *A Little Book of Life and Death*. Selected and arranged by Elizabeth Waterhouse. (Methuen; 6s.)

approach non-religious people through non-religious channels. It is the common complaint of preachers and writers that they can only preach to and write for the already converted. Apart from the radio, no one listens to a sermon who is not a church-goer and therefore, externally at least, a believer; no one reads a religious book who has not at least started to look for religious truth. In a sense, those are the people who matter least; at any rate, they matter least to the shepherds whose duty lies with the lost sheep. It seems that the only way to reclaim the lost sheep is by guile. When St Dominic was faced with a situation where the children of Europe were being perverted from the faith by false teaching, he set up a school at Prouille; the nuns did the rest. Modern Catholics use the same methods in the Y.C.W. Modern writers and editors and publishers and journalists—in fact, anyone whose business is done at a desk—have similar opportunities for exploiting what has been called the policy of peaceful penetration. Pagan England has little market for books on the Mass and the Sacraments and the Virtues; but there would be a market for novels which, with some subtlety, took for granted the Christian faith and moral order. The same is true, though to a smaller degree, of anthologies, 'bedside books' and poetry of all kinds. It is of course a fact, so the publishers tell us, that poetry is read less than ever these days; but it is still read, and even some of the poetry readers would not suffer from a dose of truth; and anthologies and bedside books certainly are read widely, if only because by modern education people are raised to a standard where they are capable of reading almost anything, but only for a short time and in short spasms. There lies the power of the bedside book and the anthology.

Without exaggerating the value of Miss Waterhouse's anthology (for there are sure to be some 'advanced' young men and women of all ages who will find her 'dated'; some indeed may be so advanced that they find themselves unable to advance beyond her introduction, which has a naïveté that is not always welcome today), nevertheless it does set an example and is a witness to the fact that truth as well as beauty has been the traditional goal of European writers. Her sources are as diverse as the Upanishads and T. E. Browne of 'A Garden is a lovesome thing—God wot' fame. Apart from any other consideration, it is good to see bound in the same volume St Clement of Alexandria, Cardinal Newman, Jeremy Taylor, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and W. B. Yeats. That does not subject the book to the charge of indifference and the religion of the lowest common multiple with which we are familiar in modern England. The whole point (the religious point, at any rate) of a book such as this is that it does not teach religion, but, it is to be hoped, effects an introduction to religion.

In addition, it is always well to remember that even religion must dress up; and religious thought must dress up also. When we read the truth about Christ or the moral Law in the measured tones of Jeremy Taylor, or the profound verse of Henry Vaughan, we are not only informed, we are moved. If it is to be possible not only to inform the minds but to move the hearts of modern agnostics, then poetry and fine prose must take on the task. They are another form of what the theologians call sufficient grace. It was a great preacher who once said that the most important part of his work was, after he had prepared the ground, keeping out of the Holy Ghost's light; the poet's mission is similar. He must keep himself and his ego out of the light of the truth. And it is at this point that literature and religion do in fact meet; the priest and the poet are both ministers to and helpers in the work of the Holy Ghost, in so far as they prepare the ground and then leave room for the Spirit to breathe where he will.



REVIEWS

ISLAM, BELIEF AND PRACTICES. By A. S. Tritton, M.A., D.LITT. (Hutchinson's University Library; 7s. 6d.)

The eleven line preface does not tell us the purpose of this book. It is therefore impossible to criticise it on its own premises. What the book conspicuously fails to do and is probably not intended to do, is to present any coherent picture of what Islam *is*. Coherence is a quality it entirely lacks. The chapter headings bely this sweeping statement: they follow the traditional divisions one has come to expect in any modern work on Islam. Within the chapters, however (except the first two and the last), the connection of one section or even sentence with what follows or precedes is often far from apparent. Characters who may be well-known to Islamic scholars make meteoric appearances without introduction, and this can only confuse the general reader for whom the series is presumably intended. No references of any sort are given—a method in itself likely to discourage interest. Further, no attempt seems to have been made to distinguish what is essential to Islam from what is incidental. The book is of necessity selective, but it is impossible to see on what principles selection has been exercised. This is particularly true of the chapters on sects (VI and X).

The book might be described as a short *Guide bleu* to Islam; it has the rare merit of being objective, the author only expressing his views in the last chapter and the conclusion. The objects are, however, presented pell-mell; and since they are themselves a subjective selection, the objective merit of the book must be a shade illusory.