

VISIONS FROM PIERS PLOWMAN. Taken from the poem of William Langland and translated into modern English by Nevill Coghill. (Phoenix; 12s.6d.)

Langland's poem has, partly because of the difficulty of language, partly for other reasons, been largely confined to the interest of scholars. Its subject matter however is of the widest possible application in England. Mr Coghill's work therefore, which started on the B.B.C. and now takes its place in print, is as important as it is skilled. Of the skill there can be no doubt in the minds of those who heard the broadcast version or have merely cast their eyes over these extracts. Not only has Mr Coghill preserved the imaginative power of the simpler poetic passages such as the Seven Deadly Sins, and the rhythmical vigour of the original: he has done a far more important thing: he has enshrined in modern English that reaching and striving spirit which almost escapes definition, but which is the very essence of the poetic form of *Piers Plowman*. The poet describes his vision of the Kingdom of England with all its sin, suffering and goodness seeking after the Kingdom of Heaven. It is of course a parable of the life of every man and of all men. But this seeking and striving is not only the subject matter of the poem, it is part of the poetic texture itself. One example—from the original description of the life of the poor—suffices:

And wo in winter-tyme. with wakyng a nyghtes
To ryse to the ruel. to rock the cradel,
Bothe to karde and to kembe, to clouten and to wasche.

Mr Coghill by the skilful use of alliteration and counterpoint has reproduced all this stress and strain that is so important to the perfection of this poem. The last line of the whole thing is a parable in itself:

He grasped after Grace, and I began to waken.

The importance of his work matches its skill: it is very difficult to come near to a true estimate of the middle ages; neither 'merrie England' nor harsh feudal tyranny paint a true picture, nor does a happy amalgam of the two make sense. There was one thing in the middle ages which we have begun to learn from Chaucer and which we needed Langland to complete for us—it was a sense of neither the transience nor permanence of earthly kingdoms but of their relation to the kingdom of heaven. Mr Coghill brings this out in his appendix where he describes mediaeval allegory which was based on the belief that the Universe was all of a piece and God could be made known through his works. That is perhaps carefree (Chaucer) by modern grim standards, but it was anything but loose or careless or 'merrie', and Langland's work shows us that. Mr Coghill's work on Langland has brought us nearer to a balanced view of mediaeval literature than most scholars.

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