

The Oxford Book
of
English Mystical Verse

The
Oxford Book
Of English Mystical
Verse

Chosen by

D. H. S. Nicholson

and

A. H. E. Lee

Oxford

At the Clarendon Press

1917

PRINTED IN ENGLAND
AT THE OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

INTRODUCTION

IN the early days of English mysticism the first translation of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* was so readily welcomed that it is said, in a quaintly expressive phrase, to have 'run across England like deere'. Since that time the fortunes of mysticism in these islands have been various, but, despite all the chances of repute and disrepute which it has undergone, there has been a continual undercurrent of thought by which it has been not only tolerated but welcomed. There have been, of course, heights of enthusiasm as well as profound depths of apathy in regard to it, but even if the limitations of the greatest enthusiasm have always been evident, so also has been the continuing readiness of some portion of the religious consciousness of the people to respond to what has been most vital in it. It is, in fact, the hypothesis of mysticism that it is not utterly without its witness in any age, even though the voice of that witness be lost in the turmoil of surrounding things.

And now it appears—it has in fact been appearing for some years—that the fortunes of mysticism are mending.

It has emerged from the morass of apathy which characterized the eighteenth and the greater part of the nineteenth century; it is reawakening to the value of its own peculiar treasure of thought and word: on all sides there are signs that it is on the verge of entering into a kingdom of such breadth and fertility as it has perhaps never known. It is as though the world were undergoing a spiritual revitalization, spurring it on to experience—even through destruction and death—a further measure of Reality and Truth.

At such a time it is of interest to look back over the past and discover something of what has been already accomplished in the way of poetic expression of mystical themes and feelings. The most essential part of mysticism cannot, of course, ever pass into expression, inasmuch as it consists in an experience which is in the most literal sense ineffable. The secret of the inmost sanctuary is not in danger of profanation, since none but those who penetrate into that sanctuary can understand it, and those even who penetrate find, on passing out again, that their lips are sealed by the sheer insufficiency of language as a medium for conveying the sense of their supreme adventure. The speech of every day has no terms for what they have seen and known, and least of all can they hope for adequate expression through the phrases and apparatus of logical reasoning. In

despair of moulding the stubborn stuff of prose into a form that will even approximate to their need, many of them turn, therefore, to poetry as the medium which will convey least inadequately some hint of their experience. By the rhythm and the glamour of their verse, by its peculiar quality of suggesting infinitely more than it ever says directly, by its very elasticity, they struggle to give what hints they may of the Reality that is eternally underlying all things. And it is precisely through that rhythm and that glamour and the high enchantment of their writing that some rays gleam from the Light which is supernal.

The ways in which mystical experience will translate itself into such measure of expression as is possible must evidently vary, both in kind and degree, with the experience itself. In sending out this anthology we have no desire to venture on a definition of what actually constitutes mysticism and what does not, since such an attempt would be clearly outside our province. 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 standpoint and in some sense a common atmosphere, and our attempt has been to steer a middle course between the twin dangers of an uninspired piety on the one hand and mere intellectual speculation on the other. The claim to inclusion has in no case been that any particular poet is of sufficient importance to demand representation as such, but that a poet of no matter what general rank has written one or more poems which testify to the greater things and at the same time reach a certain level of expression. For similar reasons we have not included the work of any poet when there seemed no better reason for so doing than that he was representative of some particular period or style.

It should be remembered, further, that this anthology makes no claim to be representative even of any poet whose work is included, since the great mass of writing by which he or she is commonly known may fall without our limits, and some little known poem or poems may have seemed to answer our requirements. The difficulty of selection has of course been greatest in the cases, like that of Thomas Traherne, where nearly all the poems are definitely mystical, and it is evident that, here and elsewhere, we have been compelled to choose from among many possible pieces. We cannot, therefore, pretend

to have made an exhaustive collection of the mystical poetry of the English language or of any poet, but hope rather that our selections may be found to be adequately representative both of the one and the other.

Beyond this question of the immediate ground for choice, it may be well to mention the limits we have set ourselves in other directions. We have felt it desirable to admit any poetry written in English, from whatever country the poet may have hailed, as well as any native poetry written in Great Britain and Ireland in some other tongue than English, and subsequently translated. Thus translations from any European language have been excluded, often with very great regret, but translations from the Gaelic have been gladly admitted. In point of time we have set ourselves no limits, but have rather sought to show that the torch of the Inner Light has been handed down from age to age until the present day, when, as we believe, the world is near to a spiritual vitalization hitherto unimagined.

We offer our sincere thanks to the following authors for permission to include their own poems :

Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie, Mrs. de Bary (Anna Bunston), Mr. Clifford Bax, the Dean of Norwich (Dr. H. C. Beeching), Mr. A. C. Benson, Mr. F. W. Bourdillon,

Mr. F. G. Bowles, Miss A. M. Buckton (for two poems from *Songs of Joy*), Mr. Bliss Carman, Mr. Edward Carpenter, Miss Amy Clarke, Mr. Aleister Crowley, Dr. W. J. Dawson, Mrs. Margaret Deland, Mr. E. J. Ellis, Mr. Darrell Figgis, Mr. H. E. Goad, Mr. Edmund Gosse, Father John Gray, Miss Emily Hickey, Mrs. K. Tynan Hinkson, Mr. E. G. A. Holmes, Mr. Paul Hookham, Miss G. M. Hort, Mr. Laurence Housman, Mrs. H. E. Hamilton King, Mr. John Masefield, Mr. Eugene Mason, Mrs. Stuart Moore (Miss Evelyn Underhill), Mr. Henry Newbolt (for his own poem from *Poems New and Old*, published by Mr. John Murray, and for Miss Mary Coleridge's work from *Poems*, published by Mr. Elkin Mathews), Mr. Alfred Noyes, Mr. John Oxenham, Mr. James Rhoades, Sir Rennell Rodd, Mr. G. W. Russell ('A. E.'), Mr. G. Santayana, Mr. R. A. E. Shepherd, Mr. Arthur Symons, Mr. Herbert Trench, Mr. Samuel Waddington, Mr. A. E. Waite, the Rev. F. W. Orde Ward, and Mr. W. L. Wilmhurst (for his own poems and, as editor of *The Seeker*, for confirming Mr. Goad's permission).

We are further indebted for a similar courtesy to many publishers and private owners of copyrights, of whom the full list follows :

The editor of the *Academy* for confirming the permission given by Miss Hort ; Messrs. George Allen &

Unwin for two poems from *The Mockers* by Miss Barlow, and for the text of Richard Rolle's poem from Dr. Horstmann's edition of his works; Messrs. Angus & Robertson of Sydney for a poem from *At Dawn and Dusk* by Mr. V. J. Daley; Messrs. Appleton & Co. for three of the poems by Walt Whitman; Mr. Edward Arnold for confirming the permission given by Sir Rennell Rodd; Messrs. G. Bell & Sons for Coventry Patmore; Mr. Mackenzie Bell for A. C. Swinburne; Mr. B. H. Blackwell for the work of the Rev. A. S. Cripps, Mr. W. R. Childe, and Mr. J. S. Muirhead; Messrs. Blackwood & Sons for confirming the permission given by Mr. Noyes for poems from his *Collected Works*; Mr. Robert Bridges for Father Gerard Hopkins; Mr. A. H. Bullen for Mr. Horace Holley; Messrs. Burns & Oates for Mgr. R. H. Benson, Mr. J. C. Earle, Hon. Mrs. Lindsay, Mrs. Meynell, Father J. B. Tabb, and Francis Thompson; the late Lady Victoria Buxton for the Hon. Roden Noel; Messrs. Chatto & Windus for George MacDonald and for confirming Miss Jay's permission for Robert Buchanan's work; Mr. W. H. Chesson for Mrs. Chesson; the Clarendon Press for its texts of Donne, Herrick, and Vaughan; Messrs. Constable & Co. for George Meredith (by permission of Constable & Co., Ltd., London, and Charles Scribner's Sons, New York), for confirming Mr. E. G. A.

Macleod); Mr. Clement Shorter for Mrs. D. S. Shorter; Messrs. Small, Maynard & Co. for two poems from *The Poet, the Fool and the Faeries* by Madison Cawein; Messrs. Smith, Elder & Co. for J. A. Symonds; the editor of the *Spectator* for confirming Mr. F. W. Bourdillon's permission; Mr. Fisher Unwin for poems from Mr. W. B. Yeats's *Poems* and *The Secret Rose*, and from the *Collected Poems* of Mrs. Duclaux, and for Mr. C. Weekes; Mr. A. S. Walker for J. S. Blackie; and Mr. J. M. Watkins for Miss C. M. Verschoyle.

This completes the record of our indebtedness. We would simply add an expression of our regret that it has been impossible to obtain permission to include any of Sidney Lanier's writing, owing to copyright restrictions. But if we cannot reprint 'A Ballad of Trees and the Master', which is the chief object of our regret, we can at least point to it as deserving inclusion in any such anthology as the present, and we can further draw attention to such other poems as 'The Marshes of Glynn' and 'A Florida Sunday'. We would gladly have included all these and even more, but we must now content ourselves with this mention of them. It is with equal regret that we offer a mere extract from George Meredith's 'Outer and Inner', but in his case the rules now laid down for quotation from his poems make it impossible to do him justice.

There are a very few poems the copyright-holders of which we have been unable to discover or to trace in spite of repeated efforts. To these unknown owners of treasure we would offer our acknowledgements and our apologies, as to those, if any, whose claims we have unknowingly overlooked.

D. H. S. NICHOLSON.

A. H. E. LEE.

ANONYMOUS

Date unknown

Amergin

I AM the wind which breathes upon the sea,
 I am the wave of the ocean,
 I am the murmur of the billows,
 I am the ox of the seven combats,
 I am the vulture upon the rocks,
 I am a beam of the sun,
 I am the fairest of plants,
 I am a wild boar in valour,
 I am a salmon in the water,
 I am a lake in the plain,
 I am a word of science,
 I am the point of the lance in battle,
 I am the God who creates in the head the fire.
 Who is it who throws light into the meeting on the
 mountain ?
 Who announces the ages of the moon ?
 Who teaches the place where couches the sun ?

RICHARD ROLLE OF HAMPOLE

1290 ?-1349

Love is Life

I

LUF es lyf þat lastes ay, þar it in Criste es feste,
 For wele ne wa it chaunge may, als wryten has men
 wyseste.

Þe nyght it tournes in til þe day, þi trauel in tyll reste ;
 If þou wil luf þus as I say, þou may be wyth þe beste.

	þar] when	feste] fastened	trauel] toil
MYST.		B	

II

Lufe es thoght, wyth grete desyre, of a fayre louyng ;
 Lufe I lyken til a fyre þat sloken may na thyng ;
 Lufe vs clenxes of oure syn, lufe vs bote sall bryng ;
 Lufe þe keynges hert may wyn, lufe of ioy may syng.

III

þe settel of lufe es lyft hee, for in til heuen it ranne ;
 Me thynk in erth it es sle, þat makes men pale and wanne.
 þe bede of blysse it gase ful nee, I tel þe as I kanne,
 þof vs thynk þe way be dregh ; luf copuls god & manne.

IV

Lufe es hatter þen þe cole, lufe may nane be-swyke ;
 þe flawme of lufe wha myght it thole, if it war ay I-lyke ?
 Luf vs confortes, & mase in qwart, & lyftes tyl heuen-ryke ;
 Luf rauysches Cryste in tylowr hert, I wate na lust it lyke.

V

Lere to luf, if þou wyl lyfe when þou sall hethen fare.
 All þi thoght til hym þou gyf, þat may þe kepe fra kare ;
 Loke þi hert fra hym noght twyn, if þou in wandreth ware,
 Sa þou may hym welde & wyn and luf hym euer-mare.

VI

Ihesu þat me lyfe hase lent, In til þi lufe me bryng,
 Take til þe al myne entent, þat þow be my ʒhernyng.
 Wa fra me away war went & comne war my couytyng,
 If þat my sawle had herd & hent þe sang of þi louyng.

louyng]	object of love, beloved	sloken]	quench	bote]		
remedy	settel]	seat	lyft]	lifted	hee]	high
ful?	bede]	bed ?	nee]	nigh	þof]	Though
hatter]	hotter	be-swyke]	deceive	thole]	bear	I-lyke]
the same	mase in qwart]	makes healthy	heuen-ryke]			
heaven's kingdom	lust]	desire	Lere]	Learn	hethen]	
hence	twyn]	separate	in wandreth ware]	shouldst be		
in trouble	welde]	possess	lent]	given	ʒhernyng]	
desire	hent]	grasped, apprehended				

VII

þi lufe es ay lastand, fra þat we may it fele :
 þare-in make me byrnand, þat na thyng gar it kele.
 My thocht take in to þi hand, & stabyl it ylk a dele,
 þat I be noght heldand to luf þis worldes wele.

VIII

If I lufe any erthly thyng þat payes to my wyll,
 & settes my ioy & my lykyng when it may coñ me tyll,
 I mai drede of partyng, þat wyll be hate and yll :
 For al my welth es bot wepyng, when pyne mi saule sal
 spyll.

IX

þe ioy þat men hase sene, es lyckend tyl þe haye,
 þat now es fayre & grene, and now wytes awaye.
 Swylk es þis worlde, I wene, & bees till domes-daye,
 All in trauel & tene, fle þat na man it maye.

X

If þou luf in all þi thocht, and hate þe fylth of syn,
 And gyf hym þi sawle þat it boght, þat he þe dwell with-in :
 Als Crist þi sawle hase soght & þer-of walde noght blyn,
 Sa þou sal to blys be broght, & heuen won with-in.

XI

þe kynd of luf es þis, þar it es trayst and trew :
 To stand styll in stabylnes, & chaunge it for na new.
 þe lyfe þat lufe myght fynd or euer in hert it knew,
 Fra kare it tornes þat kyend, & lendes in myrth & glew.

fra þat] from the time that gar it kele] may cause it
 to cool ylk a dele] every whit, completely [lit. every one part]
 heldand] inclined payes to] pleases hate] grievous
 pyne] pain spyll] destroy haye] grass ready for mowing
 wytes] passes Swylk] such tene] affliction þat . . . it]
 which blyn] cease won] dwell kynd] nature, quality
 þar] when trayst] faithful þe lyfe] The man, the soul
 kyend] nature, quality lendes] places glew] joy

XII

For now lufe þow, I rede, Cryste, as I þe tell :
 And with aungels take þi stede—þat ioy loke þou nocht
 sell !

In erth þow hate, I rede, all þat þi lufe may fell :
 For luf es stalworth as þe dede, luf es hard as hell.

XIII

Luf es a lyght byrthen, lufe gladdes zong and alde,
 Lufe es with-owten pyne, als lofers hase me talde ;
 Lufe es a gastly wynne, þat makes men bygge & balde,
 Of lufe sal he na thyng tyne þat hit in hert will halde.

XIV

Lufe es þe swettest thyng þat man in erth hase tane,
 Lufe es goddes derlyng, lufe byndes blode & bane.
 In lufe be owre lykyng, Ine wate na better wane,
 For me & my lufyng lufe makes bath be ane.

XV

Bot fleschly lufe sal fare as dose þe flowre in may,
 And lastand be na mare þan ane houre of a day,
 And sythen syghe ful sare þar lust, þar pride, þar play,
 When þai er casten in kare, til pyne þat lastes ay.

XVI

When þair bodys lyse in syn, þair sawls mai qwake & drede:
 For vp sal ryse al men, and answer for þair dede ;
 If þai be fonden in syn, als now þair lyfe þai lede,
 Þai sall sytt hel within, & myrknes hafe to mede.

For now]	Therefore	rede]	advise	stede]	place	fell]
abate	þe dede]	death	gastly]	spiritual	wynne]	wine
bygge]	strong	tyne]	lose	wane]	dwelling	sythen]
afterwards	syghe]	lament	myrknes]	darkness		

XVII

Riche men þair handes sal wryng, & wicked werkes sai by
In flawme of fyre bath knyght & keyng, with sorow
schamfully.

If þou wil lufe, þan may þou syng til Cryst in melody,
þe lufe of hym ouercoms al thyng, þarto þou traiste trewly.

XVIII

[I] sygh & sob, bath day & nyght, for ane sa fayre of hew.
þar es na thyng my hert mai light, bot lufe, þat es ay new.
Wha sa had hym in his syght, or in his hert hym knew,
His mournyng turned til ioy ful bryght, his sang in til glew.

XIX

In myrth he lyfes, nyght & day, þat lufes þat swete chylde:
It es Ihesu, forsoth I say, of all mekest & mylde.
Wreth fra hym walde al a-way, þof he wer neuer sa wylde;
He þat in hert lufed hym, þat day fra euel he wil hym
schylde.

XX

Of Ihesu mast lyst me speke, þat al my bale may bete.
Me thynk my hert may al to-breke, when I thynk on þat
swete.

In lufe lacyd he hase my thocht, þat I sal neuer forgete:
Ful dere me thynk he hase me boght, with blodi hende
& fete.

XXI

For luf my hert es bowne to brest, when I þat faire behalde.
Lufe es fair þare it es fest, þat neuer will be calde.
Lufe vs reues þe nyght rest, in grace it makes vs balde;
Of al warkes luf es þe best, als haly men me talde.

by] pay dearly for	hew] form, aspect	turned]
would turn	Wreth] Anger	þof] though
woe	bete] amend	lacyd] caught
bowne to brest]	ready to burst	reues] bereaves
		hende] hands
		bale]