

THE MYSTERY OF THE CHARITY OF JOAN OF ARC. By Charles Péguy.
Translated by Julian Green. (Hollis and Carter; 12s. 6d.)

Charles Péguy, born in Orléans in 1873, came of an ancestry of vine-dressers, 'patient ancestors. . . sturdy-footed ancestors, the men gnarled like vine-stocks. . . the women rolling their big fat bundles of linen in their barrows, the women washing by the river.' His widowed mother earned a hard living by mending straw chairs, his grandmother, who could not read, filled his mind with traditional lore. Once a week at catechism, 'our young curates told us exactly the opposite of what we were taught by our young student-masters.' The education of those days—primary schools, scholarships to *lycées* in Orléans and Paris—turned him as a young Normalien into an ardent socialist and professed atheist; yet the faith was an integral part of the way of life he loved, a fundamental part of his own vibrant ideals, of his devotion to truth and to France.

His first independently published work (in 1897) was a great trilogy on her whom we now call St Joan: Joan the little peasant girl, Joan tortured by the sin and suffering around her, Joan docile to her Voices, the lover of France, the brave fighter, the deliverer of his city of Orléans, the martyr of the Trial. When, by 1910, in the stress and disillusionments of life, he had recovered faith in the Church, he came back to her, and published the *Mystère*. He wrote about that time: 'It has been given to me. . . to put whatever a man can put of himself into representing the fourteen or fifteen mysteries, the single mystery, of the life and the vocation and the holiness and the martyrdom of the greatest saint I think that ever was.' Two long conversations, separated by a long monologue, are full of penetrating, even agonising, meditations on the distress of the human condition and on Christ's redemptive suffering. Only Péguy's conception of Our Lady seems to fall short: she is so purely human that she 'weeps and weeps' for three days and three nights during the Passion.

Anyone approaching Péguy in this *Mystère* for the first time should read the Foreword carefully. His incisive style at first sight seems repetitive; but each new phrase adds something, until the sense is bit by bit driven home. Every word is important. The translator has done his work well, but is sometimes *too* literal. Péguy's grammar is not really so strange as it is made to appear when the ordinary emphatic *moi* is translated *me*; or *les uns, les autres* by *the ones, the others*.

MARY RYAN.

MOUNTAINS BENEATH THE HORIZON. By William Bell. (Faber; 8s. 6d.)

The heart of this book is a group of twelve elegies, and here the spirit of great poetry moves in triumph and with an assurance beyond challenge. These elegies are decisive. They rise full formed and bear

with them, it seems from very far away, a mysterious authenticity. They reach more than once that extreme of eloquence which is the yielding of language to the summons of visionary power. They are concerned with final issues, with solitude and death, with effort and desire, with the nature of God's love.

I emphasise the sense of affirmation in these poems because it is by its affirmative quality that Bell's genius is immediately distinguished. Yet one can also see that he had reached a mature understanding of the European tradition and had made a particular and careful study of Renaissance versification. The structure of his stanzas, his most impressive use of the refrain, his sense of light and space—of atmosphere—owe much to Spenser. In Donne's verse he has noted how the meaning forces its way with controlled urgency through the metrical form, across the tolling rhymes. But he shares with Yeats, his master among the later poets, an unashamed devotion to the marvellous in language, and he can handle words with a firm directness, as the agents of meaning without destroying their substantial, autonomous character, their unborrowed glory.

This book as a whole proclaims a true elegiac talent. Elegiac suggests a quality sad, wistful, tender, but transcending all these because fashioned in the positive terms of poetic judgment—a quality pre-eminently Vergilian, and the harvest of a gaze penetrating in its very gentleness.

*This is the petrifying
water of memory, beneath whose stream
our dead companion can become undying
in the heroic attitudes of a dream.
He whitens in the fountain's bowl, and by it
the staring faces shall
be wholly mystical
and the complaining singer shall be quiet,
for with his martyrdom
the profiles and the passionate hearts will harden
until the mourners like the dead become
the marble population of a garden.
Our emblem is the fountain's falling tongue:
these silent naiads grieving
for Hylas, are achieving
the changelessness of a completed song.*

William Bell was killed in a climbing accident within a month of his twenty-fourth birthday. He was, therefore, a very young man when he died, but he had time to write poetry which can stand in any company.

JOHN JONES.