



Views & Reviews

The Walled Garden

By Andrew Thornton-Norris
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Reviewed by Katie St. Hilaire

Modern man has been afraid of poetry . . . essentially since poetry became modern. And for good reason: it is said that poets like Ezra Pound deliberately littered their works with obscure classical allusions for the precise purpose of separating the wheat from the chaff in the intelligentsia grain bin. For those scholars lacking the memory of Mnemosyne or the education of Aristotle, that means facing life as a “chaff”, or alternatively, reading one word of poetry to every ten Google search results. To add to the problem, one sometimes finds in horror that the meaning of the modern poem, so laboriously sought after, was not worth discovering after all, having nothing to do with beauty or truth. Thus, poetry equals fear.

And yet, wouldn't it be charming to sit down with a new book of poetry and be able to appreciate its beauties as well as its mysteries? To find that, after all, it is possible to disentangle meanings from complex syntactical configurations, and that, perhaps, looking up the occasional word is not so painful as originally imagined? If only there were a modern book of poetry, accessible enough to understand with a bit of work, that was written with a sincere sense of the true and the beautiful. *That* would be worthwhile.

Andrew Thornton-Norris's *The Walled Garden* is just such a book. The introduction is gold to any literary-minded folk, who search for ways to study poetry more effectively. Thornton-Norris tells of how the poems, written over a span of thirty years, detail a spiritual journey up from the depths of “the dominant world view, which has a rather inadequate understanding of the inner life of man”. The poems from this period he calls *Hymns of the Death Cult*, composed, he says, when “I had not yet reached the stage at which I had the words or even the ideas to express what I really wanted to say.” It is these poems, fascinatingly, which are written in the modern form. The others, written after his change in position “with regard to the contemporary spiritual and cultural situation”, are an attempt to “translate [that change] into the classic English poetic form, blank verse. The results”, he says, “are the most recent poems in this book, when I found I had begun to be able to say what I wanted to say.”

The resulting book of poems is an intriguing spiritual and literary journey in reverse, with the most recent poems at the beginning, and the oldest at the end. Thornton-Norris's discovery of truth is accompanied by his (re)discovery of an effective poetic

medium to express that truth. The blank verse at the beginning is simple, intimate, and easy to understand (indeed, almost *too* barefaced at times). The *Hymns of the Death Cult* present more of a challenge, in terms of both content and style, as Thornton-Norris himself was struggling to find the right words to say while immersed in cultural darkness. These poems, which he modestly says he “included to show how the poetic impulse began in me” are actually quite compelling and beautifully written.

One of Thornton-Norris's post-conversion poems, “Words”, aptly captures the theme that ties the book of poems into a meaningful whole:

“It is these words by which everything / Was made, and is re-made perfectly.” These verses evoke the first chapter of the Gospel of John, in which it is the Word “through whom all things were made”. The poem continues, “It is these words by which we betray / Perfection and deny that we are made / Of words . . . / Because we wish to give our own new words / To things we do not know the meaning of.” It is by a perverse sub-creation that we deny our own created nature, when, intent upon producing an artistic masterpiece, we “betray Perfection” from a wish to be the creator of something entirely original. The deep irony is that the sub-creation can only take place through the use of words—the very formal cause of our being. It is this very drama of denying God through the artistic impulse that we see played out in *The Walled Garden* and eventually redeemed as the poet comes to see that it is “these words by which everything / [Is] made.” It is only after this discovery that the poet finds that he is “able to say what [he] wanted to say.”

This theme by no means limits the book to a theoretical discourse about words; on the contrary, the collection explores a range of topics and titles from Charles Baudelaire to faith, love, sin, and England. While some of the blank verse is occasionally rather doctrinal and didactic, it is more often encrusted with luminous images and original turns of phrase that capture universal ideas and affects. *The Walled Garden* is an intriguing, diverse collection that is sure to challenge, provoke thought, and entertain.

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