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(1913?)

MAETERLINCK ON DEATH.  
(To the Editor of the "Spectator")

Sir, - A student for many years of the art and of the act of dying, I read with eagerness Maeterlinck's recent Essay, only, I must confess, to be disappointed. A brilliant example of the type of literature characterized by Hamlet in his famous reply to Polonius, there is an unpleasant flavour, a cadaverous mustiness about the Essay which even the words cannot cover; and in spite of the plea for burning our burials, one smells everywhere "the mould above the rose." To those of your readers who feel after the reading, as I did, the chill of the charnel-house, let me urge an hour in the warm sunshine of the Phaedo.

But I write for another purpose - to protest against the pictures which are given of the act of dying, "The Tortures of the Last Illness," "The Uselessly Prolonged Torments," "The Unbearable Memories of the Chamber of Pain," "The Pangs of Death," "The Awful Struggle," "The Sharpest Peak of Human Pain," and "Horror." The truth is, an immense majority of all die as they are born - oblivious. A few, very few, suffer severely in the body, fewer still in the mind. Almost all Shelley's description fits:-

"Mild is the slow necessity of death:  
The tranquil spirit fails beneath its grasp,  
Without a groan, almost without a fear,  
Resigned in peace to the necessity,  
Calm as a voyager to some distant land,  
And full of wonder, full of hope as he."

No death need be physically painful. M. Maeterlinck has been most unfortunate to be able to say, speaking of doctors, "who has not at a bedside twenty times wished and not once dared to throw himself at their feet and implore mercy"; but this is the same type of hysterical statement as "all doctors consider it their first duty to protract as long as possible even the most excruciating convulsions of most hopeless agony." There is no circumstance contraindicating the practice of Thomas Fuller's good physician: "when he can keep life no longer in, he makes a fair and easy passage for it to go out."

Nowadays, when the voice of Fate calls, the majority of men may repeat the last words of Socrates, "I owe a cock to Asclepius" - a debt of thankfulness, as was his, for a fair and easy passage. - I am, Sir, &c.,

William Osler.

Christ Church, Oxford.

*Continue next*

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BOOKS, 1911.

Pasted in Maeterlinck's "Death".

Letter from J. Duncan, M.B. Edinb. to W.O.

Kokstad,  
East Griqualand,  
Cape of Good Hope.

December 5, 1911.

Dear Sir,

When the Spectator of Nov. 4 arrived here, containing your interesting letter with its comments on Maeterlinck's Death, I had just been re-reading for the first time for 15 years the Odes of Horace. It has often struck me that so few poets of the higher ranks have attempted to translate the Odes. I suppose that, being Masters of their craft, they know that a translation is at its best a failure - and your quotation of Shelley's lines, beginning "Mild is the slow necessity of death" I read in the Spectator just after reading Ode III - in fact, I had laid down my Horace to open the paper; and fresh in my mind were the lines (29-33)

Post ignem aetheria domo  
subductum macies et nova februm  
terris incubuit cohors,  
semotique prius tarda necessitas  
leti corripuit gradum..."

Shelley, as skilful an artificer in English as Horace in Latin, translated the words "tarda necessitas leti" literally.

I suppose it is the coincidence of reading your letter and also these lines that has compelled me to write you. Living as I among black, and also so far as the classics are concerned, white savages contributes to the impulse; and also the consciousness that the "Osler" of my student days has become part of my mental equipment, and its presence by me is a never failing friend in times of need. Especially for the last reason, I feel myself without presumption entitled to take what in a stranger might be regarded as the uncalled for liberty of addressing you.)

Yours faithfully,  
J. DUNCAN.

W.O. has written in the fly leaf "~~See Aricema traité sur la délivrance de la crainte de la mort... Aricema traité mystique d'Ariceune 1889.~~"