Beryl Pogson, *In the East my Pleasure Lies: A Fourth Way Interpretation of Some Plays of Shakespeare* (Utrecht: Eureka Editions, 1999 [Stuart and Richards, 1950]), ISBN: 978-9492590374; paperback; 146 pp.

Beryl Pogson (1895–1967) was not only a pupil of Maurice Nicoll (1884–1953), a personal pupil of G.I. Gurdjieff (?1877-1949), but his secretary and probably his closest pupil. She was a member of what seems to have been an inner circle to which he imparted his most advanced teachings. After Nicoll's death, she led his groups, teaching Gurdjieff's system of personal development, as interpreted by Ouspensky, and known as "The Fourth Way;" although she seems to have added a more universalist tinge, thoroughly accepting the contemporary view that esoteric, occult, and religious all derived from a primordial dispensation. Thus, the writings attributed to Shakespeare fall to be understood in the light of the ancient mysteries and any other available esoteric source.

In the East my Pleasure Lies is the first of two books which she published offering an interpretation of Shakespeare's plays (although she herself subscribe to the Baconian theory). The other book is *The Royalty of Nature* which dealt with the English historical plays. In addition, she produced some sundry essays. In 1994, Quacks Books, York published all these in one omnibus volume, also titled *In the East my Pleasure Lies*, which was later distributed by Eureka Editions, until they published their own new editions of the two books.

Subtitled "A Fourth Way Interpretation of Shakespeare's Plays," she wrote in an opening Acknowledgement, that: "The psychological ideas incorporated in the following interpretations are derived from the System of Psychology taught by Maurice Nicoll – the Fourth Way," thus indicating that her greatest intellectual influence was her own personal teacher and the individual bent he gave to the system he had been taught. For this volume, she selected nine of Shakespeare's plays, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Cymbeline*, *Measure for Measure*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Timon of Athens*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Pogson was concentrating on Shakespeare's later period in this volume, in the belief that the more outlandish or obscure the drama or any element of it might be, the more profound its meaning (1). As there are more mysteries and marvels in these plays than in the earlier, their selection seems logical.

The author declares that the "Wisdom of the Ancients" which survives in "fairytales and mythology" provides the clue to the "inner meaning of the characters" (1). This would seem to accord with the universalist perspective on Gurdjieff teaching which was also to be prominent in the "Foundation" groups, associated with Jeanne de Salzmann (1889-1990) and Henry John Sinclair, Lord Pentland (1907-1984). Shakespeare, she avers, was following in the steps of his predecessors, the Greek dramatists in "revealing to his contemporaries and to posterity the true nature of Man and his place in the Universe" (1-2). To this end, Shakespeare depicts the depths to which humanity has fallen, and the "Way of Return … towards his true destiny, which is the attainment of his Spiritual Being" (2).

Pogson calls upon many and varied sources: e.g. above all, Greek and Egyptian mythology (2-3, 11, 19) and Greek Mysteries and Drama (50), but also Greek philosophy (94), Mithraism (57), the Old Testament (59), the New Testament (62), Gnosticism (137-138), the Zohar (4), the Arthurian cycle (3), fairy tales such as Snow White (63), the troubadours (128), Goethe and Dante (5), teachings concerning the "Third Eye" (21), and Hindu, or perhaps

Theosophic notions of *karma* (124). I have not provided all relevant page references. Most of these traditions could be harmonised with a Fourth Way psychology (although she assumes rather than demonstrates this), but not readily, I think the concept of the "Dweller on the Threshold" (124-126), which she leans heavily upon to explain the twists and turns in the plot of *Hamlet*. Either Pogson herself or Dr Nicoll took this idea from Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* (1842), or possibly H.P. Blavatsky or Rudolf Steiner.

Overall, the essence of her interpretation is that Shakespeare shows how one can master oneself: namely, by confronting and overcoming the errors and limitations of the past. This involves finding one's true individuality and acquiring the will to govern one's actions by reason and morality. For this, one must find the male and female in oneself, hence Timon of Athens – who is without a wife or even a love interest – dies in despair (9). Shakespeare often, she says, depicts heroes dying to their past; sometimes naturally, after awakening to oneself, as with King Lear; but sometimes by suicide. Hence, Othello slays his "lower self," and his death-bed kiss for Desdemona is a sign of "spiritual union" (26-27). Pogson awkwardly asserts that when Hamlet slew Claudius, he was killing his own "Dweller on the Threshold," (124-126), consistent with her statement that the plays' plots represent inner psychological events (4).

The forced nature of these interpretations not only shows her resolve to find an explanation for each puzzling aspect of the plays, but also her negligence of the question of whether the interpretation she offers was shared or even suspected by Shakespeare/Bacon. The author's presuppositions mandate her positions: if the plays have an esoteric meaning according to the preserved "Wisdom of the Ancients," then nothing in them can finally be puzzling, but must be illumined in the light of that wisdom (as each writer may understand it). Further, as the plays form an integral part of that tradition, the knowledge of the author is of secondary importance, for having been formed in wisdom, the author's writings will naturally unfold according to it, irrespective of the date or provenance of any texts evidencing any particular concept. After all, that Wisdom both transcends and is imminent within all known esoteric, occult and religious systems: it is always available, always discoverable, to someone of the requisite level (69-70).

For the same reason, and because she is a Baconian, she neither asks how Shakespeare might have known of and been initiated into the traditions she refers to, nor considers what he might have taken from the various currents within contemporary Christianity. She cannot be faulted for not knowing of modern developments which have investigated Hermeticism and Shakespeare's possible Catholicism (where the Recusant literature was psychologically deeper than is, perhaps, credited). But then, despite her considerable erudition, Pogson is not sensitive to the depictions of religious figures, such as the Abbess in *The Comedy of Errors*, and the friars in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado about Nothing.* Pogson's eyes are fixed upon the esoteric interpretation.

In the end, the book is fundamentally a collection of essays with a similar theme and method. By dividing it into chapters for each selected play, rather than each leading theme, the flow of thoughts lacks direction, and hence force. Pogson's method is the jigsaw-solving technique: if a piece fits into another and extends the picture, no argument is needed. However, someone who does not share her assumptions will be unpersuaded: to such a one, all that it establishes is that the interpreter could devise a connection of more or less plausibility. Much

of what Pogson is profound: the idea of self-mastery, of not being dominated by one's desires and passions, seeking self-knowledge before all other knowledge, does make sense much in Shakespeare. Also, he was alive to the supernatural as found in folk traditions, and made use of it in his plays. Much of what she writes is, if not so deep, still tantalising. Pogson is never dull, and her simple style never distracts the reader. However, she has not shown that Shakespeare was an esotericist, the endorsement on the back-cover notwithstanding. Even less has she demonstrated a plausible Fourth Way interpretation – that system disappears from sight, and if it runs underground, its influence is very general indeed. But she has shown that the plays can – to some extent anyway – be read as embodying esoteric ideas, and I think that suffices for a modest effort such as this: an "essay in aid of an esoteric reading of a body of first-class literature." The difficulty Pogson has not overcome is showing that Shakespeare intended, or even contemplated, readings such as hers.

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