

The New Fall Fiction

BY FRANCES C. LAMONT ROBBINS

Vein of Iron by Ellen Glasgow (Harcourt, Brace, \$2.50). Ten or twelve years ago, when there were questions as to what contribution the South would make to the renaissance of American fiction, Ellen Glasgow said: "What the South needs now is blood and irony." She has, herself, given the South its most powerful, because its most intelligent irony; and in her new novel, she offers blood. Followed to its logical conclusion, the hopeless, denigrating attitude toward humanity which characterizes the contemporary school of fiction, would lead to the universal suicide of a race of worms. Miss Glasgow, in *Vein of Iron*, tapping the iron in her own soul, bears witness to man's kinship with God. Her Fincastles came from Scotland to the Valley of Virginia in Indian days, as leaders, pastors, scholars, rebels. Whether they lived by faith in predestination and a Presbyterian God, or by faith in free will and the God within themselves, they lived bravely and well. Circumstances had no final power over them. They bore unquestioning the burden of their own behavior. In *Vein of Iron*, the twentieth-century Fincastles are the indomitable grandmother; the scholarly humanist father, free thinker, then pacifist; the daughter, a modern woman except in her willingness to assume the responsibility for her acts, who lives through war, prosperity, and depression, a balanced, fearless spirit. The Fincastles can no more be broken and cast down than can "God's Mountain" which rises high behind their valley manse. The story, in its setting of contemporary life well understood, depends for interest upon no originality of plot. Its major characters are complemented and set-off by the

secondary ones; the "tidewater" mother, whose sweet fragility endeared her to the stalwart Fincastles, people who lived in remarkable emotional independence and to whom the clinging, delicate woman must have seemed always a child; the young husband, broken on the modern wheel; the background characters who make of Valley town and Tidewater city a microcosmic world. The firm, warm quality of Miss Glasgow's prose has never shown to better advantage than in this fine novel.

A woman of controlled sensibility, who has never needed to take care lest she be romantic, Miss Glasgow has, in *Vein of Iron*, foregone the delights of iron for the joys of a larger sympathy. Where she has sometimes been merely clever, she is, here, wise. She brings to her work that third element, rare in contemporary American fiction, which makes for permanence. In her, creative gift and literary talent, too infrequently found together in our modern novelists, are supplemented by a truly cultivated mind. It is a thing that the pure poet, mouthpiece for emotions and wisdom beyond his own, can do without. But we have few pure poets among our novelists today, and I believe that the emptiness of their minds accounts for the shallowness and lack of resonance in their work. Deep calleth to deep.

Taken as a whole, Ellen Glasgow's work has a truth which goes beyond realism; though she is a realist, she never descends to the realistic. Her highly cultivated intelligence, perfectly aware of the implications of modern life, is not deceived by the current visions, either of a new earth or of a new heaven. Her firm belief in the vein of iron in man holds her interest fast to the

greatest of subjects, the struggle of the individual against Fate.

A faith in the healing and sustaining qualities of the land, a minor theme in Ellen Glasgow's book, is the main theme of *Brothers Three*, by John M. Oskinson (Macmillan, \$2.50), a good, solid novel of an Oklahoma farm. Francis Odell, inspired farmer built on an ancient, perdurable model, settles in Indian Territory in the seventies. His sons, though they become one a storekeeper, one a cattleman, and one the boy who leaves the farm for the city, are drawn back from joys, follies, ambitions and disappointments to the land which bred and made them, and are united, through their love for it, into an enduring family unit. The separate stories of the brothers tied into one whole, like sheaves by a binder, are well developed, timely, and convincing. Mr. Oskinson's narrative style is fluent, if not distinguished for any particular freshness or beauty. His dialogue is natural, his characterizations unusually fine, and he suggests with skill the subtle variations and resemblances of character which one so often sees in the different members of a large, close-knit family. Put "brothers" for "sisters" in Ovid's lines and you have the essence of the Odells — "Their faces are not all alike, nor yet unlike, but such as those of sisters ought to be." Under-Ridge Farm is the farm idealized, perhaps, but the thoroughly human people who lived on it are not idealized at all. Mr. Oskinson is not alone, nowadays, in preaching a return to the land. He is a graphic preacher, and his text is a sound one.



In *Dwell in the Wilderness* by Alvah C. Bessie (Covici-Friede, \$2.50), we have

another family novel, but one built on the now more common theme of the disintegration of the family, its cruelties and lack of understanding. The fashion of looking at the black side of life is no nearer the true mean than the silly old fashion of looking on the bright side, saying wood-pussy for skunk. The Fincastles and the Odells are happily as real as the Morrisises, who begin their sorry family life humbly in a Michigan village of the eighties and end it, so far as the book goes, gaudily, in or near Detroit of the thirties. Mr. Bessie's tendency to caricature what he does not understand destroys the reality of his characters, once he brings them to maturity. As children, the Morris sons and daughters are individual and lifelike. As they grow older they fade into a drab, dim pattern. Eben Morris, the father, is shadowy throughout, and Amelia, the mother, is a puritanical, domineering fool out of some superior funnypaper. Mr. Bessie, carrying his story along for fifty years, uses newspaper headlines and popular songs to suggest the passage of time, a scheme which was effective when new. His work has a sluggish vitality and an earnestness which hint of slow growth and possible ripeness to come.



The West again, this time Texas, is the setting of *The Wind Blew West* by Edwin Lanham (Longmans, Green, \$2.50), a historical novel. Three men, a pious homesteader, a young lawyer looking for the main chance but developing, on the way, a civic conscience, and a French adventurer, are drawn to Rutherford, Texas, by a land-shark's alluring description of a growing town, with work and wealth for all. Texas of the seventies is virgin soil for the historical novelist, rich in color and incident. Mr. Lanham, drawing heavily on histor-

ical records and selecting carefully, has made a good story of the boom town, the railroad that never came, the Indians that came too often, and the men and women who made our frontier history.



Quaint continues to be the word which springs to mind when one thinks of the books of Esther Forbes. Her *Miss Marvel* (Houghton, Mifflin, \$2.50) is a bitter little story of poor human beings who seek in imagination the joys denied them in the flesh — Endymions who dream their lover is the crescent moon. Miss Marvel lived in a New England mill-town and looked down her pretty nose at mill-hands, clerks, and the minister's consumptive son. She lived in Charleston and Cincinnati, and she came back to Wellsboro still looking down her nose, still writing unmailed letters to made-up sweethearts — "Dear You — Dear Unknown Friend — My Best Beloved." Whenever she reached out to touch life her gauche gesture was rebuffed. She became "The Marvel," she became eccentric, she became a poor little old mad-woman, living in a filthy house and dying on a heap of rotting finery. But the lover of her dreams was always waiting just beyond. Back and forth between today and yesterday, in and out between the particular and the general, Miss Forbes' morality play takes its way, subtle and deft, bitter-sweet.



The Wind of Morning by Thomas Cam-bourne (Harcourt, Brace, \$2.50) could have been a better novel. In the middle of it, the author had some sort of suspension of perception, and failed to grasp the horns of the dilemma he had created. Hugh Brune, made wealthy by a fortunate scientific discovery, buys an island off the Breton

coast and proceeds to bring up his children according to his doctrine of complete liberty for self-development. Given a hint of abnormality in the relationship of the twin daughters, a visiting lad, and complete lack of normal social contacts, then tragedy is to be expected. Dr. Brune's theory of non-interference leads to the climax of the plot; and the core of the book lies in his question: What price freedom? But Mr. Cam-bourne allows his story to dribble off from that point into a talky anticlimax. Much of the book is written with poetic insight, and there is a rapturous quality to the story of young love which suggests the youthful romance of Lucy and Richard Feverel, with its running accompaniment of Meredithian aphorisms paralleled in modern terms by Hugh Brune's sociological and educational theories.



The Wedge by Herman B. Deutsch (Stokes, \$2.50) is a fascinating, sometimes horrible, but always engrossing resume of the Mexican Revolution from the fall of Diaz to the rise of Carranza as seen through the eyes of the boy, Desiderio Triana, an image-maker's son. From babyhood, Desiderio had planned to be an artist, but he was swept into the current of the revolution while still little enough to be spanked. As a lad he chanced to witness the death by torture of the Gonzales brothers, and was therefore chosen by their family as its instrument of revenge. Desiderio became a follower of Villa's soldiers and learned how infuriated men serve a God of vengeance. Mr. Deutsch builds up a vivid background of the unique Mexican civilization, and his book is drenched with the beauty, romance, and cruelty of that fabulous land.



They Shoot Horses, Don't They? by Horace McCoy (Simon & Schuster, \$2) is a long short story, an incident expanded into a novelette. Fiction, as well as drama, is being influenced by the cinema. The technique of the pictures is being more and more frequently applied to the structure of the novel. In this story of a marathon dance, and the murder that followed it, the hysteria of witless, empty youth is well handled. The chapters are headed with cinema captions, and an effect of tension is successfully created.



There have been several collections of stories and sketches published this month, of which the best is *Life with Father* by Clarence Day (Knopf, \$2). This small book exemplifies the axiom that the whole is greater than its parts, for now that the head of the Day household has been assembled from among the magazines, he appears as a three-dimensional masterpiece, one of the richest and most completely realized figures in American fiction. One writes "fiction" advisedly, for Day, Senior, is the creation of an artist, though the original of the portrait is the artist's father. It is doubtful if a son ever wrote more irreverently of his parent, but these outrageously funny anecdotes well up from warm depths of affection and a respect too complete and genuine to fear truth. As the author says, if there had been a trace of meanness in Father, he would not have been so noisy. He emerges triumphantly as a blustering, hot-tempered, honorable, and gallant gentleman.



In *Feliciano* (Scribners, \$2.50), Stark Young, presenting sketches of the old South, then and now, adds further details to the picture of Southern culture which he

is making. These sketches, footnotes to *So Red the Rose*, are precious not only for their exquisite beauty and sharp fragrance but for the valuable moral lesson which they have for modern America. There is a saying of Confucius which begins, "When courtesy and music fail," and runs down the steps of man's descent from order to chaos. Mr. Young's record of the South calls that saying, and all that it implies, to mind.



All the Young Men by Oliver La Farge (Houghton, Mifflin, \$2.50) is a collection of stories of Southwestern sheepherding Indians. Mr. La Farge is sentimental about his chosen heroes, and his sense of humor has gone visiting. He plays off his Indians, to their infinite advantage, against Taos art-colonists, wealthy sensation-seeking females, and pot-bellied Nordic egoists. The tales are rich in local color.



Frances Marion's *Valley People* (Reynal & Hitchcock, \$2) are stories of rural life in California. Though they are written by a widely-known writer of scenarios they contain no trace of those qualities which we habitually sum up as Hollywood. Sincere in treatment, thoroughly human in conception, the stories reveal the poignant tragedies and sinister undercurrents which often lie beneath the placid surface of farm life.



Josephine Johnson's *Winter Orchard* (Simon & Schuster, \$2.50) gathers into a volume, which probably owes its publication to the publicity attendant on Miss Johnson's Pulitzer prize, a group of poetic vignettes of American country life. I did not read *Now in November*, and it is hard to

find prize material in these sketches. Miss Johnson's knowledge of the minutiae of country life is remarkable and she is highly sensitive. But this work is the untrammelled self-expression of a young person intoxicated to the point of incoherence by her sensuous delight in sounds, sights, smells, feelings, and not the product of a finished, selective artist in prose.



The Voice of Bugle Ann by MacKinlay Kantor (Coward, McCann, \$1.25) is a longish short story published as a novel. It is a good tale of men and dogs in the Missouri hills, marked by several excellent characterizations and plenty of suspense.



This month brought me six English novels. *Honour Come Back* by Naomi Jacob (Macmillan, \$2.50) is an excellent and absorbing character novel. Honour did not come back to young Michael Benham, but balance and rest from his egomania, did come to him. Obsessed, unbalanced by his sensitivity to pain in others, his horror of having to see living creatures suffer, Michael hugged fear to his bosom as his dearest possession. After a wretched childhood passed mostly in enduring and fleeing the lashing tongue of his martinet father, Michael, for fear of fear, went to war. Just before the armistice, he deserted, driven to decisive action at long last. He then fell into a kind of walking stupor from which he was finally aroused by the catharsis of confession to a wise priest, after which he was able to settle into a comfortable peasant's life in Italy. The denouement of the story is a little too easy to be satisfying.



In *Time's Door* (Macmillan, \$2.50), Esther Meynell has music for her hero, the

hardest kind of propagandist to handle. It is written by a scholar, whose musical and historical background is ample, and who has considerable literary talent, but no gift for fiction. Young Giovanni, pupil of Paganini and collateral descendant of a pupil of Bach's, opens Time's door, and slips back and forth tenuously between the major key of his life as a virtuoso in early nineteenth century Rome and Leipsic, and the minor of his vision life as his own uncle, pupil-inmate of Bach's own house, timid lover of Bach's daughter. Scholarship, love and understanding of music and musicians, and many fine scenes make an interesting, often touching book, but not a good novel.



Fly Now, Falcon by Pamela Frankau (Houghton, Mifflin, \$2.50) and *Double Turn* by Audrey Lucas (Dutton, \$2) are novels by the daughters of writers, and both deal with mileus which their authors know. *Fly Now, Falcon* is a thoughtful and penetrating story of literary London, unfortunately cluttered up with too many subordinate characters. *Double Turn* is a sympathetic tale of a player's vicissitudes on the London vaudeville stage. These books are refreshingly free from the exaggeration and sensational eroticism which so often characterize stories of the artistic world.



Land Under England by Joseph O'Neill (Simon & Schuster, \$2) is the best satirical fantasy I have read since the *Time Machine*. Anthony Julian, of the Julians of Hadrian's Wall, seeking his lost father, finds his way down into a land under England where live descendants of the Romans who, when the legions were withdrawn, one by one fled underground to escape the Saxon onslaught. In their dreadful country,

reached after wild adventures, Julian finds the Roman state grown to its awful perfection, a world of mindless, senseless robots, governed by the willpower of their leader, united by fear into a featureless mass. How Julian fought against the hypnosis of fear, how he found his father, and what came of their meeting is the story. This is, of course, a he-who-runs-may-read satire on the fascist or communist state in which the state becomes a Moloch-entity, and man exists for the state and not the state for man. Its effect is harrowing to a degree. One comes out of the book as Julian came out of the depths, gasping, glad to be alive in a lovely, untidy world of blundering individualists, where apples sometimes grow wild, and men make heroic mistakes, and we suffer fools, gladly.



The New Poetry

BY LOUIS UNTERMAYER

THERE are, say, ten important, twenty interesting, and seventy-five readable poets plying their none too profitable trade in America today. And there are between four hundred thousand and a million versifiers feverishly waiting to be hailed, discovered, printed, and otherwise presented to the public between the relative permanence of cloth covers. Does this seem too fantastic a figure? According to an inquiry made with the help of the *Publishers' Weekly*, it was ascertained that, in the last twenty-five years, some four thousand American writers had published volumes of recognizable and, presumably, original verse. Deduction and simple arithmetic guide us to the larger figures. For every poet fortunate enough to face posterity with a book there are certainly ten

poets — the number is probably nearer fifty — who have seen their lines attain the impressiveness of print in monthly magazines, weekly organs of opinion, poetry journals, trade papers, and newspaper columns without ever achieving their names on the back of a bound volume. Forty to a hundred thousand poets, then, practicing their craft with varying success and consistently little reward. But the relentless progress of mathematics will not let us stop. For every poet who has, somehow, persuaded a suspicious editor to exhibit the delicate offspring of his fancy, there are again ten (or fifty) poets who have discovered that Spring is beautiful and that Love is wonderful, who have chewed innumerable pencils, crumpled countless sheets of innocent white paper — *Papier ist geduldig* — cursed the inadequacy of the Rhyming Dictionary, and have managed to get their lines to fit without ever, alas, seeing their brain-children appear in public. These are, in all likelihood, the unhappiest half million to one million people in America, for it is obvious that at least one in every hundred persons has found out the affinity between “love” and “heaven above,” and is agog with his discovery. But they are not the most exploited. The most sought after, the most deceived, and generally the most preyed upon are the more articulate — and more ascertainable — forty to a hundred thousand whose names can be found in the smaller poetry magazines, those incubators of the not quite competent and altogether inconspicuous.

It is in these little poetry magazines that the not too gifted find an audience — if only an audience of themselves — and it is here that the not too fastidious publisher finds his willing victim. In the fifteen years since 1920, more than one hundred magazines devoted themselves exclusively to the publication of verse, about forty-