

at the same time that it desperately desired them.

The book does not profess to criticize Van Gogh's paintings; nor to discuss modern art or other artists, except as they are signposts to point Van Gogh up one road or down another on his passionate, impossible quest. For everything he did was in pursuit of one object, the founding of a community which should somehow work for good in the darkness of modern civilization. He was by turns art dealer, divinity student, lay preacher, tramp. Each adventure ended in catastrophe and Van Gogh began anew. Only after all other attempts had crumbled to pieces in his hands did Van Gogh try art. Art was simply another means to the same ideal end. And art failed, as well, to do what Van Gogh hoped of it. Also it drove him mad and killed him in his thirty-seventh year.

Van Gogh had no great talent for art in the beginning; in fact he had less than the average man. What he possessed was an intense quality of feeling, and it is this that makes his pictures even of chairs and sacks of potatoes curiously exciting and moving to the spectator. The story of his building up, slowly and painfully—as if building a house with his own hands—the artistic consciousness which could make use of his emotion, this story is the theme of Meier-Graefe's book and the sufficient reason for its existence. Incidentally, it is told with a delightful prose rhythm (admirably recapitulated by the translator) and the diction of old fairy tales, homely, poetic, vivid.

Vincent Van Gogh, *A Biographical Study*. By Julius Meier-Graefe, translated by John Holroyd Reece. With 102 illustrations after the works of the artist. Two volumes. The Medici Society.

WOOD, OPPENHEIM, AND OTHERS

By William Rose Benét

MY first distinct impression, upon turning over these books, is that Clement Wood has gained in poetic strength while James Oppenheim has lost. Ruth Comfort Mitchell, it seems to me, does adequately what she sets out to do: write narratives in verse, well knit and of considerable human interest. Babette Deutsch and Avrahm Yarmolinsky continue their thorough and sensitive work as translators. To Harcourt's European Library they first contributed "Modern Russian Poetry", and they now add "Contemporary German Poetry". Such adequate translations and well chosen collections are a service to American critics, for purposes of comparison, and a service to the poetic art throughout the world in enlarging our knowledge of its contemporary development in other countries. As for Vachel Lindsay, "Going-to-the-Sun" is a comparatively slight and a somewhat disappointing volume, but it indicates certain interesting things about Vachel.

But first, to return to Clement Wood. Some of his *Eagle Sonnets* mark his highest present attainment in poetry. They are impressive. They are clearly and courageously reasoned. With all their direct reality they touch exaltation of mood. Lyrically Clement Wood is most uneven. There is a great gulf fixed between his worst and his best. "The Black Rose" is possessed of actual magic. The long poem "Canopus" is richly wrought. Yet often, elsewhere, his taste in words and his ear for cadence somehow fail him. He goes excruciatingly wrong.

There is emotional power and intellectual honesty in "The Tide Comes In" — and just because of these qualities in the book the blunders and blemishes cause acute exasperation. But if there has been a loss in exuberance in this latest of Mr. Wood's volumes, there is also a notable strengthening of fibre. As a pitcher of planets his speed is slackening — but he has a lot more control!

Once James Oppenheim and Clement Wood seemed proceeding along much the same road poetically. Their paths have parted. Under the influence of Oppenheim's work Wood often wrote at his worst. Oppenheim, in that period, was at about his best, however. In the days of "Songs for the New Age", he was trenchant and memorable. Wood has now turned somewhat away from the mere celebration of ecstasy, just at the time when Oppenheim has found a new ecstasy — an ecstasy he celebrates in "Golden Bird", averring that this is the one book of his he would give to those who wish really to know his work.

I shouldn't. I should give them "Songs for the New Age", of the period before psychoanalysis set in. The present book is sometimes sonorous, often pungent with semi-biblical exhortation. But it is far more rhetoric than poetry. The only rhetoric it distinctly challenges is the rhetoric of King Solomon; and King Solomon could take it on with his eyes blindfolded and one hand tied behind him. That is the whole trouble. King Solomon, and the rest of the Old Testament in the King James version, have come to us through translators who were positive geniuses.

Yes, I know that the meaning and the message of "Golden Bird" is something entirely different. Granted. And I think it is often mere inflation.

James Oppenheim has power and passion as a poet; he can command beautiful rhythms, but this celebration will never be another Song of Songs, and that is its direct attempt. I remember it only as a vigorous chanting — that failed — and the words are gone. Oppenheim will again do better. "The Mystic Warrior" seemed to me of far more interest.

These opinions are offered merely as my own opinions, perhaps stated too emphatically. Prolivity and inflation of attitude threaten both these poets. But Clement Wood seems to me to be turning aside from the danger to his poetry and Oppenheim, for the moment, to be encountering it. That is all. And it is merely one opinion.

I have myself written a prefatory note to Ruth Comfort Mitchell's book and perhaps I may refer readers to that as my fairly succinctly expressed personal opinion. I feel that she possesses unusual powers of sympathetic intuition and a very chivalrous nature. She has an ability in graphic narrative, though I often differ with her ideas of the proper technique.

Vachel Lindsay is turning from poetry — he has resented the label of "jazz poet" (a rôle he abhors!) — to his first love, pictorial art. "So Much the Worse for Boston" is the best poem in "Going-to-the-Sun", but the evidences of a return to drawing pictures and a turning to the Egyptian hieroglyphic are the significant things about the book. These aren't Vachel's best pictures — but I shall treasure forever those of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Queen Victoria.

I cannot follow German poetry in the original, so whether or no the Deutsch-Yarmolinsky translations are entirely accurate I cannot avouch. All I can say is that they are most inter-

esting to read and that poetic experimentation in Germany seems to be flourishing. For anyone whose interest in poetry extends beyond poetry written in English both of the Deutsch-Yarmolinsky volumes, "Modern Russian Poetry" and "Contemporary German Poetry", should be valuable. They are translations exhibiting the skill of an able linguist and the inspiration of a fine poet.

Golden Bird. By James Oppenheim. Alfred A. Knopf.
 The Tide Comes In. By Clement Wood. E. P. Dutton and Co.
 Going-to-the-Sun. By Vachel Lindsay. D. Appleton and Co.
 Narratives in Verse. By Ruth Comfort Mitchell. D. Appleton and Co.
 Contemporary German Poetry, An Anthology. Chosen and translated by Babette Deutsch and Avraham Yarmolinsky. Harcourt, Brace and Co.

AS TO THE SHORT STORY

By Ben Ames Williams

MR. O'BRIEN'S book on the short story suffers under a serious defect; it has an ill fitting title. Perhaps Mr. O'Brien's original purpose was to discover and demonstrate the advance of the short story; but to at least one reader it seems that he has abandoned this plan, has on the whole been content with presenting a chronology rather than an interpretation. It is always dangerous to say that an art has advanced; there are grounds for asserting that art is universal and immutable and eternal. It is certainly a misuse of the word to speak of an "advance" from Washington Irving to Sherwood Anderson.

The great body of this book is composed of summary comments upon the

work of something like a hundred and thirty writers of short stories. These comments are of doubtful value, because they are in most cases very brief, and because they are put forward without sufficient elucidation or justification, and therefore carry no particular conviction. They hurt the book as a whole because they have left insufficient space for the detailed critical writing of which Mr. O'Brien is capable.

The introductory chapters offer an example of this. Mr. O'Brien classifies short stories as dependent for their appeal on "type" characters, on local color, on plot, or on surprise. The reader receives the impression that he has condemned all stories which base their appeal for interest on such grounds; yet he does not take space sufficiently to explain or justify this condemnation. Certainly a good argument may be made for characters, for local color, for plot, and even for surprise. As long ago as Aristotle's time, some at least of these elements were considered essential to good fiction. Mr. O'Brien, perhaps through lack of space, seems to put himself into the position of damning the well constructed story; I do not believe this is really his attitude.

The evil inherent in the scheme of the book is more apparent after one has read the chapter on Henry James, or the passage dealing with Sherwood Anderson. These are fine; they are interpretative, illuminating criticism of what seems to me to be a very high type. Certainly one of the ends of criticism is to stimulate the appreciation of good things; these passages in Mr. O'Brien's book do serve that end. If he had given an equal amount of space, and an equal amount of insight, to Irving, Hawthorne, Poe, Harte, O. Henry, and Irvin Cobb, his book would