

FOUR POETS

By Babette Deutsch

THE collected poems of Ezra Pound make exciting reading. For one thing, they stir up all the half forgotten emotions of the period — about a dozen years back — when this generation was young and insolent and bitter and gay, after the fashion of undergraduates who were also poets and socialists (the Russian Revolution had not yet battered in their theories and “The Waste Land” was still unwritten). In those days the gaiety and the bitterness and the insolence of Mr. Pound was our food and our liquor. For another thing, this book pushes forward a problem that has grown more acute in the interim: the problem of the expatriate as artist. And finally, there are the poems themselves — musical, satirical, over-weighted, some of them, with the nuggets and carcanets of learning, exuding, most of them, an atmosphere pungent and enchanting as the Verona marketplace.

This matter of expatriation — too subtle a subject to be disposed of in so little space — may be responsible for the fact that the collection lacks the unity which marks the collected poems of Emily Dickinson, say, or of Thomas Hardy. The book has something of the quality of that lady whose portrait the poet paints on page 61: it reveals a mind that is “our Sargasso Sea”; it yields “Ideas, old gossip, oddments of all things. Strange spars of knowledge and dimmed wares of price.” But, unlike the lady in the poem, Pound is a distinct and vigorous personality, whose desires, wounds, and prejudices are exposed with the innocence of a thorough and lovable egotism. The book exhibits many trifles which were never beautiful and which have ceased to be amusing. One could wish that

some of the translations had been omitted, and that those included had been set apart from the original pieces. But these minor irritations detract little from a volume which contains some of the most moving, most delicate and sturdiest poems written in English in this century.

John Crowe Ransom has several of the qualities of Pound. Like his senior, he is erudite and sardonic, with a liking for the tart and a rare virtuosity of technique. These are similarities that allow for large differences. His cadences are peculiarly his own, and his most commonplace subject matter gives out, under his touch, a fresh earthy odor. There are birds and beasts and flowers in his lyrics, like the mussels in the old song: “Alive, alive-O!” And there is also the cold noise of emptied clinkers and the ghostly rattle of old bones. Herrick and Sir Thomas Browne jostle each other here. There is no single poem as fine as some of the metaphysical pieces in “Chills and Fever”, but one who savored that volume should not miss this one.

In “7 P.M. & Other Poems” there is an even stronger taste of the soil than Mr. Ransom’s verses offer. The latitude is that between the country gentleman and the farmer. Not in any one lyric, but in a phrase here, a hint there, Mr. Ransom gives the sunlight and “the quick salad hues” of April, the noise of running water and the sound of wasps, as these are apprehended by some sort of scholar gypsy. The poetry of Mark Van Doren, on the contrary, is the poetry of the hatchet and the bin, the thirsty meadow, the shaggy farmhorse, as these are intimately known and used by one whose love of his land goes in “more deep than spade or fork or plow”. In this, his second book of verse, he dwells

upon the same themes that haunted "Spring Thunder", but he has now, as he had not then, found his own idiom and his own stride. He is obviously steeped in the influences that shaped the work of Frost and, somewhat less, of Robinson, yet he is no longer betrayed by his affection for these poets. The world of appearances has few lovers to praise it with equal force and simplicity.

The three books mentioned above are linked together, by the sophistication of their authors, if by nothing else. Messrs. Pound, Ransom, and Van Doren are all three learned and, for the most part, urbane gentlemen, whose poetry is fed in almost equal streams by literature and life. The verses of Langston Hughes are completely unliterary, often wilfully illiterate, and as naively vital as any old ballad or folk song. The dialect pieces fairly sing themselves when read aloud, and the others show craftsmanship of a high order. Poems like "Railroad Avenue" and "Magnolia Flower" echo in the memory. Typical of the poet's feeling for symmetry is the manner in which the last lyric in the book balances the first.

Personæ: The Collected Poems of Ezra Pound, including Ripostes, Lustra, Homage to Sextus Propertius, H. S. Mauberley. Boni and Liveright.

Two Gentlemen in Bonds. By John Crowe Ransom. Alfred A. Knopf.

7 P.M. & Other Poems. By Mark Van Doren. Albert and Charles Boni.

Fine Clothes to the Jew. By Langston Hughes. Alfred A. Knopf.

A STRENUOUS VICTORIAN

By Gerald Carson

ONE of the earliest thoughts which spring to mind when one examines the career of the late John

Morley — who died Viscount Morley, O. M., etc. — is that he could not possibly have been an American.

Sometimes we feel that we have almost a proprietary right to that free and democratic advance whereby men from modest or humble circumstances rise to high position. But it is not so. It is only the conditions that change, and the nature of the distinction which men in England, to return to Morley and the land of his nativity, attain.

In England politics and letters dwell amicably together and a gentleman may practise both. Here they are clearly disassociated and neither is an accepted occupation for a gentleman in the sense, say, of banking or the law. Some progress in this respect may be noted, indeed, in the position of current literature. But politics remain vulgate.

John Morley was a politician and an ornament to late Victorian literature, taking his place in the long line of distinguished Englishmen who have played study and affairs off each other, and with the happiest success in both. In attempting an explanation of this one must consider the remarkable homogeneity of British culture. An attentive reading of English biography enables one to form easily a good idea of a typical career. One almost always finds that Englishmen are born. They attend day school where a stern magistrate inculcates virtue, Latin, and Euclid; thence they go to a public school and Oxford — or Cambridge.

At his university the young man of destiny forms brilliant associations of which he shows himself to be worthy. He produces a prize poem and speaks creditably at the Union, and kind hands from London snatch him up and settle him advantageously in an editorial office or the Foreign Office. There he meets Carlyle, Disraeli, Glad-