

POETS AND SOME OTHERS

By Babette Deutsch

THE odium that attaches to the profession of poetry is unfortunate and intelligible. It is unfortunate since it inclines the poet to withdraw into the shell of his private identity, and cuts off a potential audience from an enlarging experience. It is intelligible because the enjoyment of poetry, like the study of higher mathematics, demands leisure, solitude, and a certain amount of pains, and chiefly because poetry, while it can be as exhilarating as mathematics is said to be, is much more disturbing. The average intellectual who goes regularly to the concert hall and the theater, irregularly visits the galleries, and keeps abreast of the discoveries in radio-activity and child psychology, is faintly disconcerted by those little books filled with narrow print that adorn publishers' lists and guest-room tables and are so seldom seen in any reader's hands. The public, the intelligent public, resembles Ulysses's crew, in that it would rather stuff its ears with wax than be confounded by song.

Half of the volumes in the batch on my desk are truly dangerous matter. Emily Dickinson had two tests for poetry: it made her feel as if the top of her head had been taken off or it made her feel so cold that she thought she would never be warm again. There are many pages in four of these books that produce these fearful effects. Two of the most chilling volumes are by Yvor Winters and Clinch Calkins.

Mr. Winters's *The Bare Hills* (Four Seas, \$2.00) is appropriately named, although the title-poem is less interesting than several others. His poetry is gaunt, gray and harsh. It is also cold, with that burning cold that belongs to ice. His book, which contains poems that have been pared down to one line, takes its quality from a singleness of effect sustained through some sixty pages of varying humors. There is an integrity about it which derives from the poet's meta-

physical passion—a passion colored by his sharp apprehension of physical things, and having its issue in a profound disenchantment with the world. He conveys it by means of a few spare, precise images. In some thirty words he will give you the essence of a moment. But these moments are an ineffectual screen for eternity. Time, Space, and the mind that spins them are Mr. Winters's ultimate concern, and in pieces like "The Streets", and "The Rows of Cold Trees" he invites you to share his tragic awareness. And preëminently in "Prayer Beside A Lamp":

I pace beside my books and hear the
wind stop short against the house like
the pneumatic gasp of death.
The mind that lives on
print becomes too savage: print that
stings and shivers in the cold when
shingles rise and fall. O God,
my house is built of bone that bends.

Beyond the roof
the sky turns with an endless roaring and
bears all
the stars. What could you do?
Could you climb up against the whirling
poles alone? Grind through the ghastly
twist of the sphere? Could you maintain
a foothold on the rising earth for
night on night and walk the
creaking floor?

The steady courage
of the humming oil drives back the
darkness as I drive back sweating death:
from out a body stricken by this thought, I
watch the night grow turgid on the stair—
I, crumbling, in the crumbling brain of
man.

Miss Calkins's performance in her *Poems* (Knopf, \$2.00) is another matter. She, too, has a metaphysic ache, but if she has suffered as keenly as her fellow-poet she has certainly thought less deeply, and her pain finds vent in a music that is foreign to him. The war between flesh and

spirit is a recurrent theme with her, but she gives it less difficult and more lyric utterance. A fairly typical instance is "Inn's Comfort":

We sit apart. I touch you with my hand.
The phantom occupant must learn his
tangible room,
The one reality in his curious doom
To find the boundary of an unboundaried
land.

Be patient with me. It was that I sought
The flesh, less evanescent than the thought.
The resurgent dust, the birth-repeating
earth—

The plentiful creator of our dearth.

Still, have we felt, when stretched upon
the fire,

We would extinguish in each other a de-
sire

For something as yet untouched, unsung,
unspoken,

Man's faith in which has never yet been
broken,

That the bright house is vulnerable to
death

And holds a deathless tenant by a breath.

We are but taverns to each other, warmth
and laughter

And the long unshuddering quiet that
comes after.

Yet even as you make a shelter for my
breast,

The lonely heart slips out upon its quest
Of the strange promise, of which so far
is heard

Only the whisper, never the given word.

The excellence of Miss Calkins's work lies in her combination of a fine melodic equipment with an austere irony. Where the two qualities are equally matched, as in "Tu Ne Quaesieris", in which she strings the bronze wire of the Roman poet's admonition upon her own new and lustrous instrument, she is admirable. Seldom a poem lacks the seal of authenticity. Her fault is that she allows herself to be betrayed by her gift of melody, and that she permits her meaning to be blunted and even obscured by the requirements of rhyme. The singing quality of such a poem as "I Was A Maiden" is agreeable, but the piece seems to have no other value. The ending of "And as she kissed" is tricky

and weak. "About My Mother" is spoiled by a facility that has not felt the pull of the bit. One is inclined to pick flaws because one hates to see anything less than perfection in a poet capable of the virtues that glimmer up from the pages of this book. The wise image, the echoing cadence, the core of quiet intensity, all are here. "Military Drill", "The Skater", the series called "Old Men", "The Gossip's Apology", "What Will She Do?", "Romance", are all individual and memorable pieces. Let "At the Casement", one further example of her gifts, suffice.

Once did I beat my head against the bars
Who sit incurious in my room of earth,
Curtained with trees and ceiled with burn-
ing stars,
Furnished with life and love, by death
and birth.

Even, I close my eyes against that heaven
Which in my homesick childhood long I
sought

At this flesh casement, iron-wrought.

Now domiciled a housewife, do I roam
Among the treasures of my wedded home.
Oh, lease be long! Eviction never come!

Yet sometimes in the shine of my belong-
ings

I see the radiance of my early longings.

The unique character of Miss Calkin's work will not allow her to be confused even with those poets of whom she sometimes reminds us. She has a more acrid beauty than Edna Millay, a more feminine ardour than Elinor Wylie.

Turning to the anthology of poems—*Fugitives* (Harcourt, Brace, \$2.50)—written by a small group of southerners who "for four years issued most of their verse in a journal called *The Fugitive*", one finds it somewhat difficult to separate the contributors in one's mind. There are poems by Donald Davidson that one might have expected to read over the name of John Crowe Ransom, and poems of Ransom's that might have been written by Merrill Moore. This is not to disparage any of these gentlemen. They share qualities which exceed their differences. Ransom may, possibly, have in-

fluenced the others, though the foreword makes much of the fact that the poets "disagreed among themselves on the literary principles which they persistently argued". The anthology seems to indicate, however, that more than half of the eleven contributors owe a debt to T. S. Eliot. Of the poets represented, I find Messrs. Ransom, Moore, Johnson, Elliott, and Davidson most to my taste. Laura Riding is too wilfully intricate, certain of the others too easy, while the performance of one or two, though interesting, does not, for me, quite come off. As a whole, the volume is a rich one, since a large proportion of the inclusions is the work of poets gifted with that mixture of emotional responsiveness and intellectual vitality that is so peculiarly exhilarating.

Poems of quite a different order are to be found in the collection which Padraic Colum has succinctly entitled *Creatures* (Macmillan, \$2.50). Here is no fledgling talent, but a poet ripe in wisdom and certain of his instrument, dealing with a world from which the self-centered introspective human is commonly excluded. Many of these poems were written years ago. I have heard the author speak them in his inimitable measured chant so that the shapes he evoked seemed to hover about his shoulders and at his right hand and his left hand. Reading them over alone I find them as fresh and profound as ever. Love, which Plato tells us is "birth in beauty whether of the body or the soul", has here built a cage of awe and sympathy about the wild things of earth, air and sea, from which they can never again escape. The book is elaborately decorated with drawings in black and white by Boris Artzybasheff. Delightful as these are, they are too bold for the text, and the publishers have made a more serious mistake in clumsily printing the book on paper like cardboard.

In *Burning Bush*, by Louis Untermeyer (Harcourt, Brace, \$2.00), we are also given the work of an established lyricist, who, like Padraic Colum, has considerable versatility. Unlike Mr. Colum, however, he lacks the unifying vision of the world which gives three dimensions to poetry. He is a musician above all, and the present volume, which marks a distinct advance over his past

performance, shows a technical achievement that it would be difficult to match. His shrewd rhymes, his fine assonances, his careful rhythms, are a continual delight to the ear. As a parodist, Mr. Untermeyer has played the sedulous ape these many years, and indeed, there are several poems in this volume that read like parodies. But there are also more than forty pieces that could only have been written by its author, and these show how much he has profited by studying the methods of his contemporaries. His melodies are more assured than before, his thrust is sharper, the accent of his emotion has a longer echo. True, he has not quite cured himself of the cleverness that sometimes rises to defeat his poetic purpose. But he has given over the easy challenge, the noisy vehemence of his earlier verse, and won a more troubling quiet. His landscapes are particularly memorable, and in such different poems as "Yet Nothing Less", "Disenchantment", "High Mass at St. Peter's", "Scarcely Spring", "Isaac", he has wrought with more than his customary skill.

The remaining two volumes fall far below those already mentioned. Marjorie Meeker's verse in *Color of Water* (Brentano, \$1.50) is unquestionably the color of water: sometimes flashing silver, sometimes reflecting tremulously a warmer radiance, but with none of the solid depths and bleeding edges that mark poetry of a high order. Miss Meeker is very clever at assonantal feminine rhymes, and she is as melodious as any bird, but no amount of shining trickery or lyric fluency can compensate for lack of intensity.

I had hoped to find in *Fire and Sleet and Candlelight* (John Day, \$2.00), Eleanor Carroll Chilton's poems, and possibly in those of the two friends who publish with her, Herbert Agar and Willis Fisher, the poetic values which were so evident in her first novel. Here I was, however, disappointed. The verse contained in this volume has, all of it, a certain high seriousness, a rather self-conscious dignity, and a great deal of monotony, both in cadence and epithet. There is more candlelight than fire, and more noise than storm. Mr. Fisher's "Hill-top" I found the most appealing piece in the collection.

A Shelf of Recent Books

MORE BIOGRAPHIES

By Robert Kissack, Jr.

- JANE WELSH AND JANE CARLYLE. *By Elizabeth Drew. Harcourt, Brace. \$2.50.*
- PORTRAIT OF LADY MARY MONTAGU. *By Iris Barry. Bobbs-Merrill. \$5.00.*
- APHRA BEHN. *By V. Sackville-West. Viking Press. \$2.00.*
- LOUISA MAY ALCOTT. *Edited by Ednah D. Cheney. Little, Brown. \$2.50.*
- WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY. *By Lewis Melville. Doubleday, Doran. \$6.00.*
- BARRIE. *By Thomas Moulton. Scribner. \$2.00.*
- THOMAS HARDY AND HIS PHILOSOPHY. *By Patrick Braybrooke. Lippincott. \$2.50.*

CATS are decidedly not the only persons who can look at kings these days. Our modern biographers are staring with the most persistent and prying cattiness at the Great and the Near-Great. He who wakes in the morning to find himself famous must not be alarmed to perceive with the dawn a dense circle of inquisitive faces peering down at him. It will not profit him to hide his head beneath the bed-clothes; the insatiable curiosity of his admirers is not to be put off like that. It is indeed a disturbing situation.

Invasions of privacy have been accomplished, however, with such consummate skill by that "Satan Among the Biographers", Lytton Strachey, that even the most retiring and modest should not complain. Although Strachey, to make possible the charming exposé in his "Queen Victoria", materializes through royal key-holes and barred doors with a Mephistophelian lack of respect, one cannot help admitting that Victoria, poor dear, really deserved all this debunking. The book, unlike Maurois's pleasant "Ariel" is always convincing in its accuracy; it should be a touchstone for all modern literary biography. In comparison, the method of many who are now reminding the world of the lives of great men is sometimes slightly objectionable, for frequently these writers

pump away so fervently in their debunking that they must needs fill the vacuum they have thus caused with mere half truths.

It is with the highly commendable purpose of correcting the ill-balanced interpretations of such partisan critics that Elizabeth Drew, author of "The Modern Novel", has recently written "Jane Welsh and Jane Carlyle". Jane is for Miss Drew neither a tragic heroine dismally neglected by a husband who was "a sort of cross between a spoilt child and a dyspeptic hyena", nor yet a hypochondriacal neurotic, but merely a quite normal human being for all her paradoxicality—a woman and a housewife, charmingly companionable at times, damnably irritating to live with at others—a housewife frequently prostrated with terrible headaches. Miss Drew is extremely sympathetic with Jane; as she declares with heartiness and warmth "she gets fond of her through everything". Casting chronology to the winds, she proceeds in the first two sections of the book with her literary corrective, and then, the antidote administered, feels free to present her own characterization. But after all, the married life of the Carlyles has had a good deal of almost tabloid-like publicity, and when our natural if not altogether admirable nosiness about personalities has been satisfied, our better natures should sigh for a day when the domestic difficulties of the famous Scotch couple may enjoy a moment of rest and quiet.

Perhaps all this may be rather finical and hypercritical. Granted that our Reading Public, as it is termed, revels in a little heart-interest or a breath of scandal now and then, is it not just possible that if we look more closely for first causes we should find not mere idle curiosity but a sincere desire for knowledge? For all we know, we may actually be in the midst of a little Revival of Learning all our own; it may be that the old Humanism, disguised in the somewhat showy dress of psychology and behaviorism, is among us again. Therefore if the study of