

will use up a little time to fill their drinks, tell a joke or two at It's expense, and remind any squares who don't know how the game is played (if indeed there is any square present aside from It) the real rules. The real rules are that when It returns, any question asked that ends with a consonant is answered with a No; any question that ends with a vowel is answered with a Yes; a question ending with a "y" permits the answer Maybe. The point of the game is that It will make up his own story, and in the process disclose to the psychoanalysts present, by his free-association, his unconscious fantasies.

That the fantasies thus elaborated may range from the murderous to the necrophilic is less alarming than the invention of the game itself. Should the misery of this class ever break com-

pletely through the bonds of custom that now restrain it, one's imagination boggles at what it will be capable of.

What is to be done? In view of the rate at which wealth is multiplying, there appears to be no likely solution in the sphere of economics, barring a cataclysmic act of God on which it would be folly to rely. Nor is there anything to be expected from old-fashioned preaching and sermonising: the New Testament today would be just another best-seller. The only hope would seem to lie with the saving remnant of the poor. Can they so far forget their class-consciousness as to relinquish to the rich some of that joy and sweetness which, under present circumstances, only the poor can afford? Such a measure will call for a generosity and far-sightedness that no privileged class in history has hitherto shown. But nothing less will save the day.

Irving Kristol

INFORMATION AND STATEMENT

IF A poem is not a statement *as well*, it is not a poem. The statement may be about anything—the infidelity of women, a tram-ride to Kentish Town, the nature of love, a friend's escape from drowning, the difference between Europe and America, an old man in a park, or a hangover. But it must be a statement, not conveyed information. Information *describes* what is known or what is known to be known. A statement *utters* (and hence creates) what is known and also what is not known to be known. Without a personal vision, by which I mean an individual apprehension of the existence of a creating god, you cannot make a statement. *Therefore*, without a personal vision, you cannot be a poet. (That is why poets are said to be born and not made, a truth professional critics of the newer sort tend, by the nature of things, to overlook.) And just as the adjective is the enemy of the noun, information is the enemy of the statement. That is to say, even when information is necessary to the statement (as it often is, in the same way an adjective may be necessary to a noun) it is an impediment. Hence information is the enemy of the poem.

I make the above remarks not to define poetry but to chip off some incrustations attached to the word. For, since poetry is a much, much rarer phenomenon than might be imagined when one considers the hundreds and hundreds of books of verse that are turned out every year,

there is not unnaturally a tendency to permit that term to embrace any prosodic writing which is a little better than the general run. And this must serve to explain beforehand why some of the following observations about individual books of poetry may appear not to err on the side of generosity.

To begin with Mr. Alberto de Lacerda*: I don't know any Portuguese and I am quite aware that verses in a Romance language one doesn't understand generally sound bewitching, even when commonplace or bad. (In parenthesis I offer the notion that there is so much ready-made poesy in the diction, cadence, and habit of some Romance languages that it must by now be hard to write poetry in them. The Irish likewise are in the same dilemma or something near it: for, born with Celtic gab and blarney, they all obtain so melodious an ease in handling English, that only with the utmost difficulty does an Irishman produce a poem instead of a bit of poesy. One might compare the earlier and the later poems of Yeats with this idea in mind. At any rate, of living Irish poets the best is Patrick Kavanagh, the acerbity of whose writing contrasts with the woolly melopœiac fluidity of most of his countrymen's.) To get back to my

* 77 *Poems*. By ALBERTO DE LACERDA. Translated by Alberto de Lacerda and Arthur Waley. Allen and Unwin. 9s. 6d.

muttons: Mr. Alberto de Lacerda, who was born in Mozambique twenty-eight years ago, is a Portuguese and by my guess a very good poet. In the book I have before me his poems are printed with English translations by Mr. Arthur Waley, with the active collaboration of the poet, on facing pages. The Portuguese verses seem full of transparent and subtle rhythms, but I may be wrong there. (The English translations on the other hand are often jerky.) But what I do take notice of is that their imagery, while perhaps a wee romantic, works, lives, and is relevant; that the poems aren't cluttered up with obstacles (*information*: description of scenery, cultural asides, etcetera, that have nothing to do with what the poems are *saying*.) Mr. Lacerda cuts his very beautiful cackle to come to the pegasuses. Each of his lyrics is a statement almost unimpeded with adjectives. They offer no description and accord no information beyond what concerns those states and powers for which we have the poet's word.

*So many poets he loved, so many poems
So often set him afire!
But in the poems he wrote
Monumental even when brief
Sings a passion only of his own
That chisels with flame the night of the ages
With that perfect voice which awakens
The remorse of men, the love of the gods.*

To give an idea of the cadence of the original, here are the last two lines:

*com aquela voz perfeita que desperta
o remorso dos homens e o amor dos deuses.*

But the translation seems heavy-footed on occasions—especially in this version of a lovely couplet:

*morta quando as asas protectoras
o velho berço, ainda, acalentavam.*

*Dead when the protective wings still used to
warm
The old cradle.*

In the following translation the word "ignore" is used (Mr. Waley notes) not in its current sense "take no notice of" but in its earlier: "not to know."

THE POETS AND THE LOVERS

*They ignore and know. They are the wine
That guides down the real ways.
Redeemers of the gods in men
There they are—
The solemn fury of the nights which dawn
The tears ignored by our eyes,
The sweetness of shores that continue,
Keeping on the sand, for a while,
Human footprints.*

TURNING from Mr. de Lacerda to the poems of Mr. Randall Jarrell,* one is immediately struck by the defensive self-consciousness of the American. This is not meant to be a criticism of Mr. Jarrell but of the kind of world he lives in (and we also) where it is really a little odd to sit down to write a poem. There is thus a sort of uncertain defiance in Mr. Jarrell's poetry, as in so much contemporary verse: the poems wear a chip on the shoulder: "Look! I'm a poem!" Because of this they every now and again forget their function (which is to make statements) and tell us the Latin name of a flower or about the good books they've read lately, and other odd bits of unwanted (because unnecessary to the statement) information. Let me illustrate what I mean from a characteristic poem, "Prisoners."

*Within the wires of the post, unloading the
cans of garbage,
The three in soiled blue denim (the white P
on their backs
Sending its chilly North six yards to the turn-
ing blackened
Sights of the cradled rifle, to the eyes of the
yawning guard)
Go on all day being punished, go on all
month, all year
Loading, unloading; give their child's, beast's
sigh—of despair,
Of endurance and of existence; look unexpect-
ingly
At the big guard, dark in his khaki, at the
dust of the blazing plain,
At the running or crawling soldiers in their
soiled and shapeless green.
The prisoners, the guard, the soldiers—they
are all, in their way, being trained.
From these moments, repeated forever, our
own new world will be made.*

Everything here earns its place with the exception of the two-and-a-half lines which even Mr. Jarrell put into brackets. These give a camera shot of the scene of the poem (and, like a photograph, emphasise the irrelevant with the relevant) but add nothing to the poem itself, in fact they finally distract attention from what is being said. For the scene does not need to be established any further than has been done elsewhere in the verses. And that is the main criticism I have to make of many of Mr. Jarrell's poems—there's too much extraneous matter, information, and padding one way and another. It is for such reasons and prejudices I am a lukewarm admirer of Mr. Jarrell's best-known piece, "A Girl in a Library," an excellent bit of writing but one

* *Selected Poems*. By RANDALL JARRELL. Faber and Faber. 15s.

belonging to the genus Short Story. Which reminds me to note that the ironic, gentle, cultivated and witty mind displayed in Mr. Jarrell's novel, *Pictures from an Institution*, is clearly exhibited by the poems collated here; e.g. the epigram "A War."

*There set out, slowly, for a Different World
At four, on different mornings, different
legs . . .*

You can't break eggs without making an omelette

—*That's what they tell the eggs.*

But I would have preferred to quote a few of the longer, successful poems, such as "The Island" (a queer one). Most of all I wish Mr. Jarrell's more recent, pared, and assured work (some of which has appeared in *ENCOUNTER*) had been included in this selection.

THE Poetry Society has had the sense to make Edwin Muir's new volume* their Spring Choice. But it made one of its odder recommendations with *Poems*† by G. J. Warnock (Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford) from which I cull, fairly or unfairly:

*The dancers' stamp and clamour
Sounds bravely on the deck
But loud like waves that hammer
Listing liners into wreck—
If love will not be pliant
You should laugh and look defiant
But my love's grown a giant
With his dagger at my neck.*

If this sort of thing is really worth recommending, why not *Poems*‡ by another Oxford man, the late E. A. Parker, where one may find Edwardian but at least less pointless strumming:

*Lost in a dream-world all his own
See where this dreamer walks alone.
By strange, wild paths he loves to stray
The scorner of our common way.
And ever in his lying dream
Sun, moon and stars bow down to him.
He is our father's dearest son.
Come, let us kill him and have done.*

Or why either of them? But let us return to Mr. Muir.

"Edwin Muir," says Mr. J. C. Hall in his useful British Council pamphlet§ about the poet,

* *One Foot in Eden*. By EDWIN MUIR. Faber and Faber. 10s. 6d.

† *Poems*. By G. J. WARNOCK. Blackwell. 3s. 6d.

‡ *Poems*. By E. A. PARKER. Blackwell. 4s. 6d.

§ *Edwin Muir*. By J. C. HALL. British Council Pamphlets (published by Longmans). 2s.

"is by general consent one of the most distinguished poets writing in English today. I say by general consent, yet it is only in quite recent years that this recognition has come to him." Mr. Hall goes on to offer a number of good reasons why, so late in the day, Edwin Muir's poetry should suddenly be well thought of; indeed, *pace* Mr. Hall, come within danger of being overvalued. However, it is the simplest reason which Mr. Hall omits: and that is, there are not a lot of people around who write as well as Mr. Muir. So it is not surprising—or is it?—that some should have at length begun to notice the fact. Indeed Mr. Muir's new collection, *One Foot in Eden*, is as good a book of verse, if not the best, that he has yet brought out. The poems are generally softly meditative, and as the title hints, the theme of many is the fall of man.

*Innocent, knowing nothing of innocence,
We learned it from the sad memorial name
First uttered by the offence.*

But there are a number of finely polished verses (e.g. "Telemachus Remembers") hung from classical pegs. Some, indeed, like the lyric "Orpheus' Dream," have for me a little too glabrous a finish. To me the music of this particular poem has the accumulated self-cancelling sweetness of syrup spread on honeycomb:

*Forgiveness, truth, atonement, all
Our love at once—till we could dare
At last to turn our heads and see
The poor ghost of Eurydice
Still sitting in her silver chair
Alone in Hades' empty hall.*

Bravo! But such lines really appertain to Yeats, to whose ghost Mr. Muir ought properly return them. Now, paying Mr. Muir—if he will forgive the presumption—the compliment of criticising his work by the highest standards, I am bound to make some general animadversions. (1) His imagery is generally beautiful but dead: that is to say, suppose he introduces a lion, he treats it as if it were a heraldic animal—its mythic or symbolic value ossifying the live brute. (2) What vitiates much of his poetry is its general solemnity, which in turn fathers dullness. Great poetry has always the element of gaiety about it (as Yeats said, "Hamlet and Lear are gay"). (3) On the whole Mr. Muir's verse (as in the poem "The Difficult Land") has the distinction of good prose—which is enough of itself to raise it well above the ruck—but only occasionally that dionysiac lift, the touch of Munchausen pulling himself out of the bog by his own hair, that turns good verse into great poetry. As Mr. Muir himself says:

There is no trust but in the miracle.

TO WIND up, I should like to mention the annual Fantasy Press anthology of Oxford poetry.* Usually there is nothing glummer than collections of undergraduate verse, but for the

* *Oxford Poetry* 1955. Edited by ADRIAN MITCHELL and RICHARD SELIG. Fantasy Press. 5s.

past year or two—movements or no—the losers of the Boat Race have been producing a series of exceptionally good undergraduate anthologies. Not only do some of the poems, but the typography and design, deserve praise. As far as the 1955 collection goes, I put my money on Messrs. John Creagh, Adrian Mitchell, and Quentin Stevenson, but don't claim not to have missed any darker horses.

David Wright

CONSCIENTIOUS VIOLENCE

THE only thoroughly unsatisfactory scene in the length and breadth of Jane Austen is that in *Persuasion* in which Louisa falls off the Cobb at Rye. For this once and once only all the authoress's customary balance and irony, her blessed freedom from the contemporary sensational and sentimental, desert her:

There was no wound, no blood, no visible bruise; but her eyes were closed, she breathed not, her face was like death. The horror of that moment to all who stood around! . . . while Captain Wentworth, staggering against the wall for his support, exclaimed in the bitterest agony,—

"Oh God! her father and mother!"

"She breathed not," indeed! It is almost a couple of pages before Miss Austen recovers her form with "the workmen and boatmen about the Cobb . . . collected near them, to be useful if wanted; at any rate to enjoy the sight of a dead young lady."

It is not, of course, the violence in itself that invalidates this scene for the modern reader—far from it; but the fact that violence is outside the scope of Miss Austen. It is the perfect example of the dangers to a writer of overstepping the limits of his private experience, imaginative or physical. It is further an example which, even in its particular form, remains perfectly relevant. Miss Austen, it is customary to remark, lived in shelter and retirement; the world is supposed to have grown more obstreperous since then; the newspapers are rich in pogroms abroad and acid-bath murders at home, and the modern reader expects to find these features of the outer world reflected in his fiction. And the novelist attempts to gratify him. Yet the fact of the matter is, that violence is still usually just as foreign to the individual English

writer's experience as it was to Jane Austen's—luckily for us. On the level of imaginative experience Mr. E. M. Forster lives at ease with sudden explosions of brutality, barbarity, or blind Fate, and Miss Compton-Burnett with will-fiddling, defective bridges, and slow poisoning; but the average writer only too obviously turns with (perhaps unconscious) relief from his episodes of conscientious violence to the tea-table and bedroom equivocations that are his proper *métier*.

Miss Iris Murdoch, for instance, who occupies a nicely got-up little philosophical mews (or muse) just off the Amis Rd., has chosen in her second novel, *The Flight from the Enchanter*,* to present a *jeune ingénue* semi-heroine, Annette, who has her blouse ripped off and breasts exposed, is it three, four, five times?—I forget: at any rate, a highbrow Jane (*not* Miss Austen). This is only the beginning of it: Rosa, the other semi-heroine, a *pas jeune désabusée*, is the mistress of two Polish refugee brothers who enjoy her night and night about, in the presence of their antique bed-ridden mother; agents rush in with photo-flashes to record this process; there is a suicide by window, a suicide *manqué* by milk of magnesia; the principal character, Mischa Fox, about whom the others revolve as round a mysterious and withdrawn centre, has the very heart of his being eaten away with some spiritual acid, leaving only a shell of cruelty, sentimentality, and childishness. "Lust and rage, lust and rage, Miss Keepe," as Mrs. Wingfield, a brilliantly drawn old lady eccentric, is fond of remarking to Rosa.

Miss Murdoch is not at all a realistic writer; her books veer continually in and out of fantasy,

* *The Flight from the Enchanter*. By IRIS MURDOCH. Chatto and Windus. 15s.