

COMMENT

IN this number of *Horizon* there are no poems. This is not accidental, it is rather an act of editorial passive resistance, a negative criticism of the poetry which is submitted. Lovers of poetry will be more than compensated by Mr. R. C. Trevelyan's 'Simple pleasures', which show that it is still possible to write poetical prose, and to produce by a combination of taste and patience a sensual catalogue which neither cloy nor irritates, but reminds us of the sanity that has been and will be.

Why is there no poetry like this? *Horizon* receives a hundred poems a week. Why are they so bad?

Because most poets have no idea what poetry is about or what a poem ought to be. Of a hundred poems seventy should never have been written. They represent the bottom level of trash which has never varied, except in bulk, throughout the centuries, for all bad poetry is much the same.

It is the other thirty poems which demand attention. They too are bad but in a different way. One cannot help feeling that their badness is curable, that they exhibit errors peculiar to the present time, a disease (like nightblindness) which we can attribute to a particular cause. If one were to make an anthology of them it would be called 'The Hampstead Book of Puritan Verse'.

What are the three characteristics of Puritan verse? Poverty of imagination, poverty of diction, poverty of experience—the characteristics, in fact, of Puritan prose and Puritan painting. If we examine an imaginary poet, for example, John Weaver, 'whose austere verse, eschewing all tricks and facile solutions, so clearly depicts the dilemma of the intellectual in the period of *entre deux guerres*', we find that he is any age between twenty and forty, is 'the child of professional parents, was educated at a major university and a minor public school, has Marxist sympathies, and is at present trying to reconcile communism, with religion, pacifism with war, property with revolution and homosexuality with marriage.' He will have been published in 'New Verse, New Writing, and New Directions, and have produced one volume of verse, with an Introduction by Herbert Read, called *The Poet's Thumb*'. 'Weaver is actively interested in politics and took part in several processions at the time of the Spanish

War. Indeed, his "particularly individual imagery discloses an extreme awareness of the 'contemporary situation'". *Heart we have been handed our passport, Love's visa has expired, Jackboot Death, Bed, my Guernica*, and many other poems show that he was among the first to hear, like MacNeice, *The Gunbutt on the door*.

For an interesting thing about Weaver is that though years younger than Auden and MacNeice, he is completely dominated by them. He imitates their scientific journalism, their Brains Trust vulgarity without the creative energy of the one or the scholarship of the other, just as he assimilates the piety of Spender and the decorum of Day Lewis into his correct, flat, effortless, passionless verses. And it is Weaver, now at an O.C.T.U. or in the Air Force Intelligence, who is responsible for some of the badness of war poetry, who used to write *Comrades we have come to a watershed*, and now talks about *Love's tracer bullets*, even as his brother Paul, who once painted ascetic winter streets for the East London Group, is responsible, with his fossilized landscapes of tanks and hangars, for some of the badness of war art. An element of Puritanism is always present in a good artist, but he should have been other things as well. The Puritan poet of the thirties has been nothing, he has been afraid of life and repelled by it, and so has acquired no experience to digest; caught in the pincer-movement of the dialectic he has acquired the modern vice of arrogant over-simplification, nor has he developed the imagination by reading or travel. He is incomplete as a person and therefore sterile as an artist, the possessor of a desiccated vocabulary which is not his own, but which he has timidly inherited from his poetic uncles, Auden and Spender, who made use of it to chasten the Georgians, and by whom, having served its purpose, it has been discarded. Such poets as John Weaver, who exist rootless in the present without standards or comparisons, are doomed to swift extinction, for the war has proved a godsend to bad artists, allowing them to attain honourably and for their country's good that impotence which in peacetime is only accepted after a long and terrible struggle. In choosing its poetry *Horizon* has tried to avoid printing a poem by John Weaver: he has been mentioned only because he represents the fair to middling poetry that has been rejected. Here, by Mr. Evelyn Waugh, is an opinion which would seem to belie this.

'Then the poetry. It seems to me of very poor quality, though I don't doubt it is the best you can buy. But I think it is time we made up our minds that poetry is one of the arts which has died in the last eighty years. Poets now have as much connexion with poetry as the Fishmongers' Company has with selling fish. They carry on the name and the banquets but have retired from trade generations ago. The men who write your "poetry" seem to me to be trying to live on the prestige of a dead art. Shelley talked of poets as the legislators of the world, and they seem to have applied this to themselves without any justification at all. I believe "poetry" now should be left to the unpaid columns of the provincial press without making the writers foolish by labelling them so inappropriately.'

'Most poets (according to Spender in the *Listener*) would refute Shelley's claim. Nevertheless—he adds—there is a core of truth in the statement which it is irresponsible to evade. Here we reach a deep cause of puritanism—the poetic sense of responsibility. Let us tell the poets at once that no one need legislate who does not want to, for to be an unacknowledged legislator to-day involves reading so much science, politics, and economics that only a Huxley, Heard or Joad or Auden can undertake it. All we ask of the poets is to sing.

The novelist writes about poetry, however, as if it were an extinct liqueur. There will always be poetry in England: it is the concentrated essence of the English genius, distilled from our temperate climate and intemperate feelings, and there will always be critics who claim that it is dead. But, poetry is going through a bad patch. The sophisticated intellectual poetry of the twenties is exhausted. Poetry was taken down a cul de sac to get away from the Georgians, and now it has to find its way back. The academic socialism of the thirties was not strong enough to revive it, we are waiting for a new romanticism to bring it back to life. This will happen when the tide of events sweeps round the lonely stumps on which our cormorants have been sitting and gives them a fishing ground—for one of the difficulties of John Weaver has been the isolation of his mood from the uneasy fatuity of between-war England, and another, up to the war, the sheltered unwonted uneventful character of his life. Now that events have caught up with his prognostic and he is no longer out of step with the rest of the population, his work will deepen and simplify itself.

This process is only just beginning, and this new kind of poetry is still of uncertain quality—nevertheless, a magazine can do something to help by eliminating from its pages the conventional Puritan verse, what Shakespeare must have meant by ‘here are only numbers ratified; but, for the elegance, facility, and golden cadence of poesy, caret’, and by publishing those poems which reflect the lyrical influence of Lorca rather than the intellectual one of Auden, Eliot or Rilke, or by publishing by women writers like K. J. Raine, Ann Ridler, or E. J. Scovell, who have by-passed both academic asceticism and rhyming journalism, or by young soldier writers like Alun Lewis, to whom it comes easily to be simple (their French equivalent, now a prisoner, is Patrice de la Tour du Pin), and by encouraging only the best work of the best younger poets—Spender, Empson, Thomas, Barker, Rogers, Vernon Watkins.

As an industrial nation we lag behind: our factories are not the largest, our generals not the wisest, but as an ancient civilization that is not neurotic, where thought once more is correlated with action, and which fights for its beliefs, we should, in those invisible exports like poetry and fine writing, be in a position to lead the world.

ABOUT THIS NUMBER

The Letter from France is by the same talented lady who wrote the Letter in the March Number of *Horizon*. The ‘Simple Pleasures’ of R. C. Trevelyan are reprinted from the *Abinger Chronicle*.

‘My Father’s House’ is an episode from Evelyn Waugh’s new long incomplete novel, *Work Suspended*, which will appear shortly in Penguin Parade No. 10.

The Christmas *Horizon* will contain Raymond Mortimer’s essay on Balzac, a letter on Spain, and a new piece by Arturo Barea.

The January *Horizon* will be a Young Irish Number, and include a Comment from Dublin, an article on Jack Yeats’ painting.



LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURES—1

OSBERT LANCASTER