

and specifically Fascist in Spengler's theory is his almost furious insistence that, in the teeth of overwhelming evidence, there is no connection between one civilization and any other one, that there is no history of mankind as a whole. The great civilizations, he literally says, are 'gloriously meaningless'. Here the circle is closed. Fascism started with the shame-faced whisper that, after all, all ideals are dead and that, in order to keep human affairs going, an artificial stimulus of ruthlessness must be infused into them, by however insincere means. It ends with the assertion that the complete meaningless of life is the basis of sound philosophy.

But let us not be self-righteous. He that is without blame may cast the first stone. The absence of values able to prompt determined action is not limited to Fascist circles. The war has fortunately brought out the fact that, in some countries, negative values at least exist in sufficient strength, that people are still ready to die to ward off certain extreme evils. But the feeling of pointlessness of positive effort has not yet gone. I believe that it is deeply ingrained. It is the root-fact of Fascism. No easy solution, no facile watchword, will undo it. It is not only the root-fact of Fascism, it is also the root-problem of mankind at the present moment.

Yet one thing seems certain enough. In the context of the Fascist philosophy of meaninglessness even those elements of Fascism which otherwise would have meaning can only be incidents in a sanguinary tragi-comedy of self-destruction. There may be something to be learnt from our enemies. But our enemies cannot learn it. Only anti-Fascists can bring out the positive elements of our age.

STEPHEN SPENDER

MODERN POETS AND REVIEWERS

MR. ALEX COMFORT'S admirably intelligent letter in the May number of *Horizon* serves as a link between my article on 'Poetry in 1941' and the present Postscript. This letter clarifies the attitude of poets under thirty to poetry and the limited extent to

which they consider themselves interpreters of the war. The war has caused a sharp division of writers into three generations: the generation of those who were consistently blind to events from 1918 to 1939 and who now find themselves in the strongly entrenched positions in literature, the arts, and home affairs which fall to the superannuated during times of war; the 'New Writing' generation of those who were acutely aware of the approaching war, ever since 1933, and who therefore regard it almost with relief, as a fulfilment of their prophecies; the generation of those who are the war's victims, too young to have been in any way responsible for it, and in some ways filled with bitterness against the preceding generations.

What has this to do with poetry? Very little, but it has a good deal to do with the criticism of contemporary poetry, as anyone who reads the literary periodicals will know. Writers, little known writers in particular, cannot afford to be indifferent to what is said about them. The fact that there is a likelihood of literature falling into the hands of a generation who have little sympathy with the new; the existence of an intermediate generation who regard this war as a fulfilment of their forebodings during the past ten years, and as, perhaps, the beginning of a new era; all this is tough on Mr. Comfort and his friends, who 'see this war as a degenerative, not a conflict process'.

We are therefore certainly reaching a stage when the abused term 'young writer' has a meaning different from the sentimental one in which it has been used to appeal to the maternal instincts of reviewers and editors during the past ten years. 'A young writer' for the next ten years will mean a writer produced by this war, who has written nothing before it, and whose work wears the birthmark of October 1939.

All this will seem nonsense to the run of reviewers of poetry who—some months after a volume has been published—are unleashed to produce those snarls and gibes, twenty words long, peculiar to this field of literature. 'We judge poetry only by external standards', the chorus of Humbugs cries. 'We do not care about young or old, new or reactionary.'

Yet, looking at the volumes in front of me, I can readily recall some of the standards by which I have seen them judged. For instance, Sheila Shannon, reviewing *Work in Hand*, in the *Spectator*, finds Mr. Graves's poems 'bitter on too personal a note.'

Need the poet make a public show of his private agonies?' she cries (somewhat irrelevantly, it must be admitted, as this is the last thing which Mr. Graves does).

One might confine oneself to answering with the one reminder: 'Catullus'. Yet it is more important to point out that criticism is not criticism which does not, primarily, consider work for what it is; and yet nearly all poetry is criticized for what it is not. Mr. Graves writes a poem which is 'bitter'; another poet one which is 'personal'; a third poet writes a poem expressing a fantastic vision of the future; and all these are not criticized, but just dismissed by the reviewer; not because they have failed, but because they have succeeded in doing what they set out to do, and their very aim is counted as failure. The critics use all the resources of Victorian morality, the Austerity Campaign, psychoanalysis, politics, and pure æsthetics, to dismiss any thinkable kind of subject matter for poetry, without taking the trouble to read it. On these grounds, if they were living today, Petrarch would be dismissed as self-pitying, Shelley as a Narcissist, Keats as self-centred, and so on. As a matter of fact, the anarchy of standards is so great, that I have seen some of these writers attacked on these lines. At the very worst, one writer is used as a stick to beat another with, and the whole of the past is invoked to show that Mr. Graves, instead of being bitter in a small way, should be 'bitter with a huge bitterness and furious with a devouring fury'.

Having no standards whatever by which to judge literature, reviewers appropriate every standard which they can lay hands on. Reading Miss Shannon's *Spectator* review one would think that she had the genius of Sappho combined in one mortal frame with the moral fervour of Jeanne d'Arc. It is often a consolation, when one is slated, to rest (as one might in the all-pervading but uncomfortable love of God) in the wonderful genius of one's critics. The poems of Dr. Leavis, the sapphics of Miss Shannon, of what perfection one dreams! Alas, though, I am brought to earth by a typical production of this kind in *Lyra—Merlin to Man-kind*, by that austere standard-bearer, Mr. Robert Herring. It is a typical reviewer's cake-walk along a garden made of artificial crazy-paving:

'Learn, belov'd loons, for whom my sleep is done:

No farther break; but turn, and face, your Sun.'

The young poets are right to publish manifestoes, such as the

Foreword to *Lyra*, explaining what they are after. Poetry needs criticism which judges it within the limits and tasks which it sets itself. There is, of course, a further standard which judges it for what it is, and the writer for what he is, but to be too conscious of this will simply distract a writer from the work he has in hand. The most common failure in literature is the failure to accept one's limitations: to do what one can do, instead of what one would wish to do. It is not helpful that critics should dismiss work by judging it from standards according to which it should not exist. Obviously such criticism is entirely destructive both of poetry and the poet's personality. For example, if all Whitman's critics, instead of estimating his achievement for what it was worth, had confined themselves to pointing out that he was a homosexual Narcissist, he would either have had to shut their criticism completely out of his consciousness or else stop writing. Mr. Comfort explains that *Poems from the Forces* is 'a poetic version of the state we see in psychological out-patients every Wednesday and Friday afternoon'. Well, we should judge the poetry of Fraser, Comfort, Litvinoff and Moore as that, before we dismiss it as that. The Pétainism of the young poets must be allowed for.

By the standards within which it exists, Robert Graves's poetry is remarkably successful. Technically he is a master, his vocabulary and music have a bite and tang which is as recognizably his own as is, say, the blank verse of Massinger. His imagination is of a Germanic, Grimm's-fairy-tale kind. Fundamentally he is a naïf poet: his poems grow out of harsh and bitter experience like gnarled trees out of harsh soil. But they are also given a twist by a German taste for abstraction, which expresses itself often in compound words like 'unevent' and 'one-hour-seeming'. Moreover, often the meaning of a poem is reaching towards some such philosophic abstraction which is in contrast to the tangibility of imagery and language in which it is conveyed.

Norman Cameron is a fine technician. His poems have the neatness of epigrams. The language, with the toughness of Graves, is extremely pleasurable; but the thought tends towards the commonplace thought (as in *The Invader*) or experience (*The Wanton's Death*) superbly well expressed, whereas there is something mysterious and inaccessible about Graves's world.

Alan Hodge has acquired the discipline of Graves and Cameron.

This means that his poems have striking passages of natural observation: he is particularly good on the weather. But at present they are so imitative that I cannot readily distinguish them from their models.

The Third Selection of *Poets of Tomorrow* contains the best of the series. These poets—with the possible exception of Mr. Gascoyne—are closer to the writing of Graves and Cameron than to that of Fraser and Comfort. Lawrence Little is a careful and observant writer painting scenes of lower middle-class and working-class life very minutely. His poems are touching, sordid, sometimes beautiful, sad and nostalgic:

‘There is some grass, too thin
To be windblown, and some struggling
Nasturtiums, sown after their rightful
Natal period. And they are seemingly peaceful.’

All his poems in this selection are good, and I would like to see a volume of them published. Gascoyne’s poems are somewhat ‘Eighties’, gracefully tired and mellifluous. They flow on languidly, but attractively, in a kind of poetic journalism. His poems are very readable, though they lack concentration, either of words or rhythm.

Laurie Lee would have been hailed some years ago as an imagist poet. His eye and senses are remarkably vivid, and his writing has a flickering, animal quality. He is a truthful, unthinking, though not unreflective writer, noting down his experiences in pictures made of words:

‘By day the print of your body
is like a stroke of sun on my hands
and the choir of your blood
goes chanting incessantly
through the echoing channels of my wrists.’

This is charming because it is true. The Jeanne-d’Arc-Sappho of *The Spectator* writes of Laurie Lee, ‘most of his faults are attributable to a quite original lack of poetic talent’. One is tempted to think that the lady has never been loved.

Adrian Drinan is another close and observant writer; his subjects are Sutherland and the Western Isles. His work has the tough, musical honesty, closeness to nature and nationalist

traditionalism, which seems to be growing to the proportions of a movement in the arts in Scotland. Besides publishing in *Poets of Tomorrow*, he has brought out a volume (very nicely printed and on beautiful paper) with The Fortune Press. It is called *The Men of the Rocks*. The Fortune Press seems to be one of the most enterprising modern publishers; and they are doing a great service to literature in publishing volumes by such writers as Gavin Ewart, Ruthven Todd, D. S. Savage, Roy Fuller, George Woodcock, Francis Scarfe, Nicholas Moore, John Waller and Julian Symons. All these writers are worth watching, and their volumes are worth collecting.

Ruthven Todd's volume in this series is called *Until Now*. It contains some new poems, and poems which deserve to be well known, if they are not, such as *In September* 1937. Mr. Todd is a writer of close observation, like the other writers whom I have been reviewing. He also has Graves's gift of creating memorable legends. His earlier poems suffer a bit from too many undigested references to bombs, like all poetry of that period. His poems are remarkably well written, and often contain beautiful imagery. They are stifled at times by a too heavy load of references to literary ancestry. They move a little stiffly from line to line. They have little lightness and freedom of movement.

Lyra is, to my mind, a better book than *Poems from the Forces*. There is a more interesting and discriminating choice of poets than in the earlier collection; the poems by the individual poets are more interesting; there is a striking Preface by Mr. Herbert Read; and a Foreword by the editors, Alex Comfort and Robert Greacen.

Enough has been said to show that these poets are pacifist in philosophy. The best poems are by Alexander Comfort, who works out the logic of a strange and beautiful image in 'The Atoll of the Mind'; G. S. Fraser, whose 'Two Sonnets' and 'Birthday Greeting' resemble the evanescent yet beautifully controlled water-colours of David Jones. This poetry is more than romantic on the surface, it is also full of the sense of weakness, frustration, and tears of the young. There is a facile and conventionally pleasant 'Spring Poem' by John Bayliss. Other striking poems are by Robert Greacen, Emanuel Litvinoff, and F. T. M. Smith. Vernon Watkins, Henry Treece, Francis Scarfe, and Anne Ridler are better known; they are all at their best in this anthology, which

really serves as a useful introduction to the work of these writers. I suppose one must speak of them as a movement; though a movement is much more the propaganda that a group of poets make for themselves in the absence of sympathetic criticism than any common poetic aim which they share between them. However, these writers do have superficial resemblances: the sense that they are victims of the war, a touching sense of deprivation in love, and an almost childlike attitude towards women.

Besides the Fortune Press, they have another courageous publisher in the Favil Press's series of Resurgam Poets. These are shilling pamphlets containing work by young writers: Numbers Six and Seven are by Alex Comfort and Emanuel Litvinoff.

Incidentally *Lyra* contains the best poem I have yet seen by Nicholas Moore: the short elegy *For a Repertory Actor Killed in a Car Smash*.

Mr. Henry Treece is looked up to by these writers as a leader, and his poems therefore have a special interest. They grow from the Welsh twilight of the earliest poems to the violent, intoxicated declamations of the sequence called *Towards a Personal Armageddon* at the end. The early poems are accomplished and attractive, though they are as arbitrarily lacking in originality as the later poems are bursting with it:

‘Love has no limits like the year,
Nor like the word depends on breath;
Desire is started by a tear,
And Passion dances after Death.’

It is impossible to give the feeling of the later poems without quoting at least twenty lines; but in a violent, swaggering manner, they are powerful and effective. For a long time poetry has been inhibited, and over careful; Mr. Treece lets himself go into a fine carefree rapture. His poems should certainly be read by everyone interested in the development of modern poetry. It is not possible for me to make any criticism of value about them. At first I did not like them; now I am affected by their power, though I find the braggadocio distasteful.

My severe remarks about reviewers should be qualified by a word of praise for such critics as Edwin Muir, K. J. Raine, and one or two of the anonymous reviewers in *The Listener* and *The Times Literary Supplement*, who do far more than bring their

prejudices to bear on poems which they have not troubled to read. They also qualify some of my own remarks in my previous review: it might be a good innovation if *Horizon* lets its reviewers occasionally have 'second thoughts' as do members of the Brains Trust.

A time has now come when it is possible to say that there is definitely a new movement in poetry: this movement is politically pacifist, defeatist even. Yet these are the politics of the poets who are soldiers in the army: their hatred of war is a literary rather than a political attitude. It is a rejection of the level of experience in which they are compelled to spend their lives, in the search for another level where they are most conscious of the 'apocalyptic' nature of the events around them. To be aware of this, they must see the disconnectedness rather than the connectedness of things; they must see the natural cataclysm rather than the logical development of the destructive machine age.

With the best will in the world, it is difficult to think that much of value can be said by critics about these writers at the present stage. But they are a significant development; their minds are, indeed, representative of that of many ordinary people, who feel that they are living at the end of a world rather than at the beginning of a new social order. Readers should not look to the critics for their opinions: they should read the work of these young poets and judge for themselves.

Lyra. Edited by Alex Comfort and Robert Greacen. (G.W.P. 5s.)

Invitation and Warning. By Henry Treece (Faber 6s.)

Work in Hand. By Robert Graves, Norman Cameron, Allan Hodge. (Hogarth 2s. 6d.)

Poets of Tomorrow (Third Selection). By Lawrence Little, David Gascoyne, Laurie Lee, Adam Drinan, Arthur Harvey. (Hogarth 6s.)

Resurgam Poets, Numbers 1-7. (Favil Press, 1s. per volume)

AN OPEN LETTER

TO HERBERT READ FROM HARTLEY RAMSDEN

Dear Herbert,

1st May 1942

As you said you would be interested to know what I thought about your article in the April number of *Horizon*, I am taking you at your word and sending you a short comment. Yet, while I differ fundamentally on certain