

Yahrzeit

By SAMUEL ROTH

And first he was a strangeness in the door,
And then a wall between me and the sun,
And then a quiet voice which spoke to me.

And lifting up my head I said to him:
"Brother, you are as merciless as God.
Are not my days already filled with it?
My heart is dry; how can I sorrow more?"

"It's not the time to talk such things," he said,
And saying lit the yellow mourning lamps
And ranged them on the window sill and mused:
"The sky is black; likely 'twill storm tonight."

And then he opened up the book and read:
"Upon this day the souls of all the dead
Gather before the awful Judgment Seat
To render an account of all their deeds."

Outside, the night was full; the clouds hung low;
Sinuous quietness before the storm.

I turned my face to him. "There is a spell
That binds me heart and soul. I cannot think.
I cannot feel. Something is numb in me
That should be life." "It's time to rest," he said.

And he lay there and at his side I lay
While Furies shook the Night beating their wings
Against the window-panes on which the light
Wove shrouds and shrouds of yellow flickering sheen.

"You do not sleep," waking he spoke to me.
"I cannot sleep tonight," I answered him.
"I cannot sleep or feel. O could you know
The pain that numbs my soul." I hid my eyes.

"I know your pain," he mused and gazed at me.
"She does not love you more. Is that not so?"
I mumbled: "That is so."

"Your youth is sad,"
He sighed. "You should love less and set your heart
Upon more sacred things than woman's love.
Now is it to be wondered you are dry?
You have not drawn upon the wells of God."

"What are the wells of God?" I asked of him.

"And if I tell you where they are," he said,
"Will you then leave your love to find them out?
Has living taught you nothing, then, but love?
Do roadways lift themselves towards the sky?
Do stones roll passionately into brooks?
And have you ever seen a hillside lift up arms
And reach out to the passing clouds for love?
You are a road, a stone, a hillside, brother."

The mourning lamps flickered away and died.
Dawn rose over the town, over the rain.
And he uprose and prayed and went his way.

Books

Tragedy in Camelot

Lancelot: A Poem. By Edwin Arlington Robinson. Thomas Seltzer.

IN "Lancelot" Mr. Robinson has continued the study of Camelot which he began three years ago in "Merlin." It is still the Camelot so unknit by its virtues that it crumbles slowly under the weight of its vices. Of all the knights who rode off on the flaming quest of the Grail, only Gawaine, who came home almost before he started, still believes in Camelot. And Gawaine is casual and earthy in the very face of dissolution. Hard yet humane old Bedivere foresees the day when there will be no Camelot and no Arthur, nor any kings whatever, but some new order of life. With Lancelot, however, who here keeps the stage, it is not so much a matter of believing or disbelieving in Camelot—though he sees its end—as of holding with integrity to his fated path in a shattering world.

God, what a rain of ashes falls on him
Who sees the new and cannot leave the old.

The devastating Light has tempted Lancelot, too, away from his place in Arthur's great experiment, though he is bound to it by the desire of Guinevere, whom the Grail has never tempted, could never tempt. His tragedy is the necessity of choosing between them, to the accompaniment of murder and war and heartbreak.

Mr. Robinson's conception of character is that of Merlin, who, in the earlier book, saw

In each bewildered man who dots the earth
A moment with his days, a groping thought
Of an eternal will, strangely endowed
With merciful illusions whereby self
Becomes the will itself and each man swells
In fond accordance with his agency;

and in the protagonists of Camelot

swollen thoughts of this eternal will
Which have no other way to find the way
That leads them on to their inheritance
Than by the time-infuriating flame
Of a wrecked empire.

Such a conception, with its deeps below deeps of personality and its habit of yoking souls with stars, might have afforded a less disciplined poet the opportunity for cosmic ranting. Mr. Robinson, of course, does not rant. As in his shrewd annals of Tilbury Town he has never succumbed to the mere paint and patches of local color but has hit the universal with his narrowest strokes, so here in the wide world of fable he is still as accurate and natural as at home. Lancelot, hero of a thousand romantic plots, is piercingly set forth without blur or mist. After his treachery to Arthur and his murder of Gawaine's brothers he knows that no forgiveness could make Camelot endurable again for the lovers. Nor is there any hiding-place in France where the Queen of the Christian world and Lancelot of the Lake could live unnoted. Neither prayer nor valor can bring back a summer of love. And always there is the Light which irresistibly beckons him to his isolate salvation. Guinevere, who has no such vision in her fate—or her character—does not seem so clearly a "groping thought of an eternal will." But Mr. Robinson portrays her, entirely loyal and entirely woman, no less skilfully than Lancelot, who is here something of the saint and yet predestined traitor to love. When first Lancelot tells her that she must go back to Camelot, where Arthur dotes and Modred plots and lusts, she almost dies under the ruthless words; but later, having accepted her fate, in their final interview at the convent, though she is still woman and not saint, she is stronger than Lancelot.

The poem has the stark, unpopular grandeur of those trage-

dies in which men are overwhelmed not by reason of outer accidents but by reason of some trait of the soul—in this case especially stark and unpopular because the trait is that passion for an ideal which lifts men above their senses and rends them from their societies. To such a theme Mr. Robinson's style naturally adapts itself. His blank verse is somewhat less soft than in "Merlin," which had to describe the sumptuous garden of Broceliande, and which had occasionally a Tennysonian dying fall at the stanza ends. The verse of "Lancelot" is as athletic and spare as an Indian runner, though it walks not runs. The ballad clatter of Kipling or Masefield would never have served the purpose of Mr. Robinson, who argues too closely and subtly, and moves his action to a conclusion which for its effect must have been foreseen and dreaded and yet have been implicit in the action. At the same time, he varies his verse in admirable accord with situation and character. Since Browning there has been no finer dramatic dialogue in verse than that spoken by Lancelot and Guinevere and no apter characterization than in the ironical talk of Gawaine. One must go out of verse, to George Meredith and Henry James, to find its match. But Mr. Robinson has the advantage of verse.

C. V. D.

Etching

Etchers and Etchings. By Joseph Pennell. The Macmillan Company.

THE enthusiastic student who aspires to be an etcher is confronted in the preface of Mr. Pennell's book with the following remark: "Everything about making an etching can be learned from an etcher in a morning: but it will take the student all his life to put his learning into practice; and even then he will almost certainly fail to become an etcher." The student who can survive this blast and proceed under full sail is dauntless as Jason. He will discover, however, before he has journeyed far upon his quest that Mr. Pennell, although a pessimistic and querulous helmsman, is an experienced and valuable one. Mr. Pennell's book, designed for the collector as well as the student, is a beautiful piece of bookmaking; the reproductions of the etchings are much finer than those commonly to be met with. The text is divided into two parts: the first studies the work of the great etchers; the second reviews from a technical standpoint all the known methods of etching.

In its historical or critical portion, the book deals only with masters who are dead; it is not, as Mr. Pennell says, "an advertisement of living etchers." Whistler, according to the author, is the greatest etcher who has ever lived. As the Lutrine oyster had a sea created expressly for it, so Whistler has Mr. Pennell's book as a specially designed abode. In the end, however, from the standpoint of the true etching, as Mr. Pennell understands it, the reader probably will not be inclined to quarrel very sharply with the writer's judgment upon the relative merits of Whistler and other etchers. The foundation of great etching is the expression of impressions with the most vital as well as the fewest lines. A great etcher necessarily must be a great technician. "The drawing and placing of the lines on the plate is a part of the making of a great etching, and in the biting of the plate there is as much art as in the drawing of it, while the whole is crowned by the printing, and all great etchers have been great printers and their own printers." In this perfection of the technical side of the craft which cannot be disassociated from great etching, Whistler was most supreme. The light which Mr. Pennell throws upon Whistler's method and practice is extremely interesting. He introduces reproductions of many of Whistler's finest prints, and comments upon them in such a way as to guide the ordinary reader to a more intelligent appreciation of Whistler's genius as an etcher. The famous Black Lion Wharf is superbly reproduced. Such selections as *Weary*, the *Annie Haden*, and the drypoint *Jo* are admirably fitted to illustrate Whistler's ex-

quisite line, the grace of his rendering, the distinction of his observation. Interesting, too, is an etching, *Beggars*, from the *Venice Set*, proffered as a basis of comparison with an etching upon the same subject by Rembrandt.

In his criticism of Rembrandt, Mr. Pennell makes it quite clear wherein certain plates are meaninglessly cross-hatched and are lacking in vital economy of line. The *Mother* is an instance in point, where the draperies are handled rather meanly as compared with the *Annie Haden* of Whistler. Although Rembrandt's large Biblical subjects are referred to as huge "pot-boilers," Mr. Pennell is led, nevertheless, into a more than temperate admiration of them. Two of those reproduced are among the finest ever etched by Rembrandt—the *Christ Presented to the People* and the *Three Crosses*. The latter especially is very impressive—more so than the less ambitious etchings which Mr. Pennell praises as superior technically. Meryon comes off badly in the Pennell book. "The bulk of Meryon's work is totally uninteresting, totally uninspired, devoid of spontaneity, absolutely easy to imitate, poor in perspective, without observation, out of scale, faked." But since Meryon himself admitted he was no etcher, Mr. Pennell's remarks probably will not cause him to turn in his grave. However, he did a few astonishingly good plates, which Mr. Pennell acknowledges, in the *College Henri Quatre* and the famous *The Morgue*; although Meryon's treatment of sky and smoke in the latter plate is just as bad as Mr. Pennell says it is. But if Mr. Pennell's generalizations seem too harsh as regards the work of Meryon, they do an injustice to Sir Seymour Haden, who is branded with Meryon as a stodgy duffer. It is doubtless true that Haden resorted to commercial methods, but he "had something to say for himself" in other plates besides those in the list drawn up by Mr. Pennell. Two of Haden's finest plates, here shown, surprise Mr. Pennell into enthusiastic comment. The *Sunset in Ireland* he calls "the most poetical drypoint landscape that exists," while of *The Breaking Up of the Agamemnon* he allows that "no finer etching in pure line was ever made by a British artist." Little space and brief mention is given to etchers other than the four already discussed. A horde of lesser etchers are dismissed with very frank contempt, so that the reader who wishes to learn about them must seek elsewhere. In the historical section of the book Mr. Pennell's critical notes, which face the various reproductions and comment upon their individual qualities, constitute his happiest and most illuminating moments.

The second part of "Etching and Etchers" explains with lucidity the technical processes which are involved in the making of an etching; it also discusses their preservation, cataloguing, mounting, and arranging. This section is rich with information drawn from Mr. Pennell's long experience and from that of foreign etchers; the volume offers material here which has never been published before. In this section, too, are several reproductions of Mr. Pennell's own work illustrating various methods of treating plates. They all have distinction and beauty, especially the mezzotint *Wren's City* and the drypoint *London from My Window*. The chapter *On Trials and States* will be of peculiar interest to the collector, since it exhibits the ignorance of most cataloguers regarding the true states of plates. The collector, too, will find many suggestive hints upon the exhibition of prints in the chapter *On the Arrangement of a Print Room*. Aside from the practical information to be got from the technical division of "Etchers and Etching" the collector and the student will get from it a new understanding of how precariously a great etching depends upon technical processes; how the whole business of making one is a breathless adventure entered upon by the artist with love—and fear. Those who carefully read the technical chapters and then return to the historical portion of the book will review Mr. Pennell's criticisms with more patience and infinitely more understanding. The book as a whole does etching a great service.

GLEN MULLIN.