

## Bright Forts Against Oblivion

*The Master-Mistress.* Poems by Rose O'Neill, with Drawings by the Author. Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.50.

*The Black Panther.* By John Hall Wheelock. Charles Scribner's Sons. \$1.50.

*The Box of God.* By Lew Sarett. Henry Holt & Company, \$1.75.

*Cloister, and Other Poems.* By Charles L. O'Donnell, C.S.C. The Macmillan Company. \$1.

"I bring this weight of savage singing here,  
Fitting for you who feast upon fierce things."

ON this austere note Rose O'Neill opens one of the significant volumes of American poetry. Not for her the formality of kempt verse: in *The Sonnet Begs Me* she names her role—

"To lift for night's sweet thieves my houseless horn  
In broken rhythms of the windy grass."

Such golden utterance merits a title from the most golden-tongued of all our poets. The collection contains more than a score of poems of such amazing beauty and strength that they push outward the bourn of English singing. In these, she stands within that place of savage enchantment sung in *Kubla Khan*. To say that she is at once established as a leading American poet of today is less true than untrue. She is as American and as much of today as the wind: and no more. She is a sport, a freak: dateless, eternal. Not of her skill nor her teaching does this singing come: half of her body is in the earth; up through it tremble the sweet dark whispers that once made faun and gnome and slant-eyed Pan and uncouth earth-shaking Titan. Often at her best she is mad: a madness as inspired as Blake's, a lucid possession.

"The wind was full of withered leaves,  
The golden and the red;  
They cried to one who hid his eyes,  
'Follow the flying dead."

"Come loose your soul from off the bough  
Where it doth hang and sigh,  
And give it to the long-maned wind  
And see your dead soul fly.

"And loose your heart from off the stem  
Where it doth pulse and pale,  
And on the sea of running air  
Let your dead heart sail.

"For only the dead are travelers,  
The wild leaves sang and said.

"Follow, follow, follow,  
Follow the flying dead!"

More powerful, in their sustained magic, are long pieces like *The Wind Among the Leaves*, *Sale*, *The Silent Hound*, *As I Went By*, *The Eagle Hunter*, *The Returned*. For sheer lyric sanity, she gives us *Established*:

"I made a house of houselessness,  
A garden of your going:  
And seven trees of seven wounds  
You gave me, all unknowing:  
I made a feast of golden grief  
That you so lordly left me,  
I made a bed of all the smiles  
Whereof your lip bereft me:  
I made a sun of your delay,  
Your daily loss, his setting:  
I made a wall of all your words,  
And a lock of your forgetting."

It is profanation not to quote further; yet the book is your best mine, to find your own gold. We must mention *Mea Culpa*, *The Maker's Stealth*, *And Few There Are*, *I Made a Little Eater*,

*The Candle*. We must forego mentioning *Owl Sinister*, *The Crying Hearts*, and a score of worthy others. We cannot forego giving the savage splendor of her *The Gift*:

"Now that I am lame,  
Now the fierce is tame,  
Now the mane is shorn,  
And the banner torn;  
I bring thee, lord,  
The shattered sword.  
Take the tattered fool,  
Take the broken tool,  
Take the last offense,  
This ruined insolence!"

At her height, she is untouchable. It must be remembered that her singing-ground is always the ghoulish haunted woodland; there is no rounded vision of life here. Be it her blame that she has given us no dirge on the death of the first Mrs. Wilson, no ode on the opening of the Panama Canal, no rhapsody on the election of Harding or Hylan. She is master-mistress of one wild field, in which her words and her magnificent drawings are supreme.

Apparently these poems have not been published in magazines, although their treasure-trove has been known to many of our singers, who wear a faint accolade spun of her glory. This umbrella from the July sun of immediate criticism has helped keep her out of the current of modern poetical thinking, or she would have spared us "I heav-ed me," "thine ensanguined eyes with lethal looks," and other interred Keatsianisms. The mis-indentation practiced in *The Bed*, *The Roads*, and elsewhere is something an uninspired adept in poetics could have corrected. Lastly, she lacks the selective faculty, somewhat as Vachel Lindsay lacks it, which explains the pyrites among the more precious ore. But she nods so little, in the large, that we may consider ourselves blessed to have her, and our literature richer for her savage ancient ecstasy.

John Hall Wheelock has established his peculiar province in American singing—the high air of sheer ecstasy. It is the mood of *Sunrise* and *The Marshes of Glynn*; it is the mood of the bird-song in *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*; it is a mood almost silent, save for these examples, in our earlier singing, and heard too infrequently now. His former volume, *Dust and Light*, contained poem after poem that mounted in breathless rapture to a crescendo of wide rhythmic beauty. There is one poem, *The Divine Fantasy*, in this compilation, which lifts higher than anything in the previous book. It builds from a noble introduction—

"Life's flag advances on the starry way,  
And Consciousness, still battling, still at bay,  
Holds the bright forts against Oblivion."

Poetry is no more than bright forts against oblivion. From this exalted mood the climb is to the humbler wonder of the night-noises of earth. Some one has defined genius as the power to make analogies; the poem is strong with such startling images as "Hunger, the shadow cast by death"; and with beauty like:

"Now in the rain-drenched wood  
The tree-toad drinks the rain and finds it good,  
And trills for joy . . . and the little mouse  
Furtively hurries through the lane, his eye  
Turned up in terror as the owl goes by . . .  
Ecstasy of the firefly that trails  
Among the shadows where the starlight fails  
His body's burning love. Forever flows  
The dreadful drama to its stately close  
And endless ending—the fierce carnival  
Of death and passion, wherein each and all  
Mix, and are mingled, slaughter, blend, and pass  
Each into other—the high poem that has  
No end and no beginning."

The concluding apostrophe is as deep a note as he has ever sung. Minute observation of nature, transmuted into sheer poetry—

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this it has to a marked degree. His song is at flood-tide in such a piece as *Sea Horizons*:

"As bread that for my daily fare is broken,  
The eternal loveliness before me spread—  
Unutterable gesture—word unspoken,  
In the proud silences forever said!

"The sun puts forth his strength, the reaches shimmer  
With inarticulate rapture, and the proud  
Waters are thrilled; the fields of ocean glimmer  
With shifting light and overshadowing cloud."

In human relationships, there are varying notes; the most wistful is caught in the couplet:

"Telling of one upon a hopeless quest—  
How in the dark of Time he lost his way!"

There is majesty in the opening sonnet and the concluding poem; there is high vision in *Night Hath Its Fear*, *Proud Doom*, *Blind Players*, *The Silence*, *Legend*, many others. His weakness is an overdevelopment of the ecstasy, that at times threatens a mere wordlessness; coupled with a slight tendency to repetitiveness. But his contribution to current singing is a unique and vital one.

Lew Sarett is an interesting poet, among other reasons, for his interpretation of Amerind rhythms and moods, growing out of ten years' experience as guide and woodsman among the Indians of the North Country. Two-thirds of this volume are devoted specifically to Indian themes, and the other poems have not forgotten the spell of K'cheegamee land. The opening poem, despite its high praise by Mr. Wheelock, Carl Sandburg, and others, is not as impressive in its totality as many of the shorter things. Its nature flashes are splendid:

"Beyond the peaks  
That tusked the sky like fangs of a coyote snarling,  
The full-blown mellow moon that floated up  
Like a liquid-silver bubble from the waters,  
Serenely, till she pricked her delicate film  
On the slender splinter of a cloud, melted,  
And trickled from the silver-dripping edges. . . .

A cry—pointed, brittle, perpendicular,  
As startling as a thin stiff blade of ice  
Laid swift and sharp on fever-burning flesh;  
The tremulous wail of a lonely shivering wolf,  
Piercing the world's great heart like an icy sword."

At the same time, we cannot see the gain in having the Christian missionaries refer to the Indians as "ye men of a bastard birth"; it may be characteristic, but it does not ring true in the evangelical exhortation. The parts where the Indian speaks of his god—

"'My frien', Ah-deek, you ask-um plenty hard question:  
Ugh! w'ere Keetch-ie Ma-ni-do he live?  
W'ere all dose Eenzhun spirits walk and talk?  
Me—I dunno! . . . Mebbe . . . mebbe over here,  
In beaver-pond, in t'rush, in gromping bullfrog;  
Mebbe over dere, he's sleeping in dose mountain. . . .'"

These seem out of drawing. Yet this may be a limitation due to insufficient knowledge of the type. It may be characteristic, as the Indian Council talks in the last third of the book may be; but the latter indubitably are not kith of poetry, and at best are interesting ethnological contributions. The other Indian poems are better. Of the miscellaneous verses, many possess a retiring sensitive beauty, reminiscent at times, that rises to poetic distinction in one poem, *Let Me Flower as I Will*, which is by all odds the most successful thing in the volume. The dominant impression is of a fresh soil for cultivation, a keen sense of beauty at times, but a lack of the synthesizing power to utter with finality the shaped song. This may well come; it is much to have the new word to say.

Mr. Sarett's lack is in great measure Father O'Donnell's

merit. This slim volume, in part a reprint of his "The Dead Musician" of six years ago, contains at least half a dozen lyrics which are part of Time's golden pack. He calls high music out of the sonnet:

"Said Alan Seeger unto Rupert Brooke—  
They walked by banks of timeless asphodel  
Along which Acheron's dim waters fell  
With soundless motion—'Wherever here we look,  
Brother, are faces that our glances took  
For old familiars of that world where dwell  
Those that we knew before we came, through hell,  
Unto this peace. Familiar as a book  
We coned in school is that Virgilian brow,  
And one moves toward him with Pindaric grace.  
See where they meet, twin shades, and that they bow  
Where blind eyes star an old man's wrinkled face.'  
And Rupert Brooke to Alan Seeger said,  
'These are the immortals, we are but the dead.'"

There is a breathless perfection about such songs as *Transformation*, *Harvest Fields*, *The Poet's Bread*, *The Cross*, *Requital*. There is a deep religious note that knows the worshiped abstractions as breathing reality, in *The Son of Man*, *Partus Virginis*, and the exquisite quatrain *The Son of God*. Lacking Francis Thompson's sweep, he is finer in small; we prefer his chiseled gems of song to the best of Father Tabb's. In his longer pieces like *The Dead Musician* he has evoked stately music, a little thin, but ever authentic; and there are few poets living who have sung better than *Forgiveness*:

"Now God be thanked that roads are long and wide,  
And four far havens in the scattered sky;  
It would be hard to meet and pass you by.  
And God be praised there is an end of pride,  
And pity only has a word to say,  
While memory grows dim as time grows gray.  
For, God His word, I gave my best to you,  
All that I had, the finer and the sweet,  
To make—a path for your unquiet feet.  
Their track is on the life they trampled through:  
Such evil steps to leave such hallowing.  
Now God be with them in their wandering."

Savage singing to silver singing—but always singing. To let the old hideous-sweet music of forbidden earth speak again; to let the buried red race have its word; to lift earth high; to bring God near—such are their achievements.

CLEMENT WOOD

## Two Major Novelists

*The Goose Man*. By Jacob Wassermann. Authorized translation by Allen W. Porterfield. Harcourt, Brace and Company. \$2.50.

*Ditte: Towards the Stars*. By Martin Anderson Nexö. Translated by Asta and Rowland Kenney. Henry Holt and Company. \$2.

OF the many novels of Jacob Wassermann, the present reviewer has read only the two published in America, but these are sufficient to make it evident that Wassermann's name may be mentioned without too much apology with the names of some of the greater Russians. It is true that neither "The World's Illusion" nor "The Goose Man" is the equal of "Crime and Punishment" or "The Idiot," but there is enough similarity to suggest the comparison and not enough disparity of merit to make it ridiculous. Like Dostoevski, Wassermann belongs with those men who have descended into the hell of poverty and want and who have brought back with them a vision of life which is as fascinating as it is terrible. The form of his novels with their enormous scope and rapidly changing scene is striking, but it is not this form so much as it is the intensity of his spiritual ardor which makes him remarkable. Few contem-