

## Turmoil in the Middle Ground

PITTSBURGH MEMORANDA, by Haniel Long. Writers' Editions. Santa Fe. \$2.50.

IDEAS OF ORDER, by Wallace Stevens. Alcestis Press. \$7.50.

AMONG the handful of clichés which have crept into left-wing criticism is the notion that contemporary poets—excepting those on the left and extreme right—have all tramped off to some escapist limbo where they are joyously gathering moonshine. That such an idiot's paradise has existed no one can deny; but today the significant middle-ground poets are laboring elsewhere. And the significant trend is being marked by such writers as Wallace Stevens and Haniel Long: poets whose artistic statures have long been recognized, whose latest books (issued in middle age) form a considered record of agitated attitudes toward the present social order. Like all impressive phenomena of the middle ground, *Pittsburgh Memoranda* and *Ideas of Order* show troubled, searching minds.

As a matter of record Haniel Long has been struggling for a "solution" ever since his singular stories and poems appeared in the liberal magazines a dozen years ago. Frankly mythological but clearly rooted in the industrial present, these bizarre pieces signified both a great deal and nearly nothing until *Notes for a New Mythology* (1926)—of which *Pittsburgh Memoranda* is a continuation—gathered them into a meaningful whole. Here was the testament of a mind fed on classic philosophy, Unanimism, feudal romance, the Irish mystics, German romantics, Whitman fraternalism and Amerindian art trying to make truce with the chaotic barbarism of the civilization in which he lived: Pittsburgh. To him this microcosm of world industrialism was a fabric of magnificent promise as well as sporadic fulfilment, but there were streaks of blood across the patterns, blood from the daily industrial struggle. Thus forced to reconcile facts with his philosophy of fraternalism, he super-imposed upon the immediate chaos a complex floral design of its imagined future. He was cynically aware of big-business charlatanry and political corruption; but although he did not cover his eyes and rhapsodize, he did something equally unreal: placed full trust in the capacity of the human imagination to erase evil. And he wished the present hideousness into a gorgeous future.

The story of how Pittsburgh returned to the jungle may or may not have a moral, but it is a curious example of the effect of legislation on a modern city. One spring a millionaire nurseryman, lobbying for his private gain, and in league with a manufacturer of window boxes, was clever enough to attach to a piece of legislation, a rider which had nothing to do with the measure in question and which favored abundantly his own business.

Pittsburgh is overrun with horticulture, becomes a "city of ravines and gulches;" desperate competing corporations put the million-

aire on the spot, only to have him become in time a martyr and saint and in this far-flung future Pittsburgh is sung by "the poets of Louisiana" as the "city of unfading flowers."

There are almost enough anti-capitalist innuendoes to make the reader suspect that Long had by no means made a satisfactory philosophical adjustment; in fact, the whole book at times has the grin of satire. He was, at that time, I believe, a Socialist and although politics and art infrequently mixed in American books of the 'twenties, he had already begun a gigantic poem on the same social theme, which was to occupy him for twenty years. Originally projected as a blank verse of epic breadth, it shot up and withered in a variety of growths, until its final form comes as a group of eleven prose and verse fragments characterized as "memoranda."

It is a bewildering document in many ways. Long undeniably feels Pittsburgh as part of his blood and bone and brain, but the people who carry this city on their backs are abstract masses of humanity. He loves the colors and shapes of Pittsburgh as if he had designed them with his own hands: intimate attachment which leads him to blur by a kind of transcendental humanitarianism what starts out to be a bitter exposure of social filth. Now, it is manifestly impossible to analyze the complex corruptions and miseries of such a phenomenon as Pittsburgh without some feeling for class antagonisms—they are painted on the houses of every street, there is scarcely a human habitat more obviously stratified into economic classes. But Long insists on "understanding" Pittsburgh as the joint handiwork of all classes. It is a horrific evil nurtured and condoned by humanity as a whole for which humanity as a whole is responsible, and must cure—the work of nightmare in the race dream. Hence, "courage to us, who fight not Indians but insanity."

The book covers roughly fifty years, beginning with the Homestead strike and concluding with 1935, with chapters on Stephen Foster, Carnegie, Westinghouse, Henry George, Pittsburgh youth killed in the war, Duse in Pittsburgh, etc.

Our memories though sown of blood and death are humid with the roots of a fresh life. . . .  
Can an oak tree be full grown by the seventh day?

The great new sun, the sun of our life together, is hardly yet at rising; we are men peering about us in the dark of dawn.

And the nature of this new day:

It grows too clear how personal life destroys its pattern; understanding this, delight throbs in our blood, and in the mind a new hope blooms, up from the ageless marrow which rules our life and which we cannot rule.

Innumerable passages emphasize that this new phase of the race dream is some form of collectivism; but he does not stop with point-

ing the goal: he writes propaganda for a method of action:

We only grow  
by answering to the eternal, and then answering  
with something of the eternal to ourselves. . . .  
How then: what theory of the State can save us,  
if we must change the worst within ourselves?

NEW MASSES readers will wonder, with this reviewer, why Long does not recognize that "the worst within ourselves" is the product of economic states which must be eradicated before we can hope for any inner human perfection. If mankind's fulfilment is his supreme desire, where else can he turn to for real hope except Marxism?

But no one will read this book as a guide to action, particularly readers familiar with Long's body of verse which includes some of the finest lyrics of the last decades, among them an unsurpassed translation (from *La Gioconda*.) Unlike certain much-esteemed poets, he does not seek startling images that make one momentarily unaware of the unhealed points of juncture. Free from the scars of false graftings, his best prose and verse has the organization of a plant flowing up from the ground. And this quality helps to explain the truly amazing grip which *Pittsburgh Memoranda* takes on the reader's attention even though he squirms at occasional bathos (pp. 57, 58, 63) and hungers for proletarian feeling in passages noisome with humanitarian vagueness. There is too much sheer excellence to let one stop reading. The prose moves with tempos so surely modulated that the mood passes easily from irony to reflection, from tenderness to arraignment. But the chief importance of this book as art is structural. Long attempts a politico-social analysis not by anatomizing distinctions (the method of logic) but by perceiving beneath the surface of disparate material elements bearing a basic kinship. Thus he makes use of all sorts of things—statistics, news-reports, fragments of verse, stories, quotations, judgments—and he builds them into mosaics that image the hope of a collective order.

Confused as it is, *Pittsburgh Memoranda* is a marvel of order alongside Wallace Stevens' volume; and yet to many readers it is something of a miracle that Stevens has at all bothered to give us his *Ideas of Order*. When *Harmonium* appeared a dozen years ago Stevens was at once set down as an incomparable verbal musician. But nobody stopped to ask if he had any ideas. It was tacitly assumed that one read him for pure poetic sensation; if he had "a message" it was carefully buried and would take no end of labor to exhume. Yet he often comes out with flat judgments and certain ideas weave through the book consistently.

The magnificent cause of being,  
The imagination, the one reality  
In this imagined world

underlies a number of poems. Realists have been bitter at the inanity of Pope's "whatever is right," but Stevens plunges ahead to the final insolence: "For realists, what is is

what should be." And yet it is hard to know if such a line is not Stevens posing in self-mockery. One can rarely speak surely of Stevens' ideas.

But certain general convictions he admits in such a poem as "To the One of Fictive Music." Bound up with the sovereignty of the imagination is his belief in an interfusion of music among the elements and man. And "music is feeling . . . not sound." This trinity of principles makes the business of living to him a matter of searching out the specific harmonies.

*Harmonium*, then, is mainly sense poetry, but not as Keats' is sense poetry because this serener poet is not driven to suffuse sensuous imagery with powerful subjective emotions. This is "scientific," objectified sensuousness separated from its kernel of fire and allowed to settle, cool off and harden in the poet's mind until it emerges a strange amazing crystal. Reading this poetry becomes a venture in crystallography. It is remembered for its curious humor, its brightness, words and phrases that one rolls on the tongue. It is the kind of verse that people concerned with the murderous world collapse can hardly swallow today except in tiny doses.

And it is verse that Stevens can no longer write. His harmonious cosmos is suddenly screeching with confusion. *Ideas of Order* is the record of a man who, having lost his footing, now scrambles to stand up and keep his balance. The opening poem observes

... This heavy historical sail  
Through the mustiest blue of the lake  
In a really vertiginous boat  
Is wholly the vapidest fake. . . .

And the rest follows with all the ironical logic of such a premise. The "sudden mobs of men" may have the answer

But what are radiant reason and radiant will  
To warblings early in the hilarious trees. . . .

Sceptical of man's desire in general, there is still much to be said for the ordering power of the imagination. But there remains a yearning—and escape is itself an irony. "Marx has ruined Nature, for the moment," he observes in self-mockery; but he can speculate on the wisdom of turning inward (*vide* Long), and a moment later look upon collective mankind as the guilty bungler of harmonious life, in "a peanut parody for a peanut people." What answer is there in the cosmic law—"everything falls back to coldness"? With apparent earnestness he goes a step beyond his former nature-man interfusing harmony:

Only we two are one, not you and night,  
Nor night and I, but you and I, alone,  
So much alone, so deeply by ourselves,  
So far beyond the casual solitudes,  
That night is only the background of our selves. . .

And in a long poem he pours out in strange confusion his ideas of order, among them

If ever the search for a tranquil belief should end,  
The future might stop emerging out of the past,  
Out of what is full of us; yet the search  
And the future emerging out of us seem to be one.

Paraphrase, always a treacherous tool, is especially dangerous when used on so *raffiné* a poet as Stevens. Does he talk of himself when he explains that the "purple bird must have notes for his comfort that he may repeat through the gross tedium of being rare?" Does he make political reference in declaring "the union of the weakest develops strength, not wisdom?"

Asking questions may not be a reviewer's function, but uncertainties are unavoidable when reading such poets as the two under review; for the texture of their thought is made of speculations, questionings, contradictions. Acutely conscious members of a class menaced by clashes between capital and labor, these writers are in the throes of struggle for philosophical adjustment. And their words have intense value and meaning to the sectors within their class whose confusion they articulate. Their books have deep importance for us as well.

Of course, objectively neither poet is weakening the class in power—as yet they are potential allies as well as potential enemies—but one of them looks for a new set of values and the other earnestly propagates (however vaguely) some form of collectivism. Will Long emancipate himself from his paralyzing faith in inner perfection? Will Stevens sweep his contradictory notions into a valid Idea of Order? The answers depend not only on the personal predispositions of these poets but on their full realization of the alternatives facing them as artists.

STANLEY BURNshaw.

## Mr. Aiken at a Wake

*KING COFFIN*, by Conrad Aiken. Charles Scribner's Sons. \$2.50.

"AN internationally famous novelist and poet," the publishers tell us, "here turns his genius to a tale of mounting suspense and horror." In other words, Mr. Conrad Aiken has written a crime story and it seems at last that the American artists, like those of the Soviet, are beginning to write for the masses. There is a slight difference, however. In the Soviet Union, the artists, who are "in uniform," write so that the people may better understand reality. In this country, where most artists are free, they write only so that people coming home from a discouraging day's work, may get a little second-hand excitement, to forget reality.

It must be said that the book does not come off too well. The weight of Mr. Aiken's stream-of-consciousness technique is too much for the flimsy plot. Perhaps it is not meant for the usual mystery story reader but for those who want something a little more "arty". In fact, recalling some of Mr. Aiken's earlier psychological poems and narratives, there does not seem to be a tremendous amount of difference between them and this. Can it be that Mr. Aiken, even at his most serious, never had anything very much to say?

SIMON WELLS.



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