



A MORAL FOR REVIEWERS

Has Jan Valtin yet succeeded in disenchanting Fred T. Marsh? . . . And some thoughts on the way Lon Tinkle rearranges the facts of life in his review of Pozner's "The Edge of the Sword."

I HATE to bring up the distasteful name of Jan Valtin once again. I hate to recall those murky days when so many people, ordinarily sensible, swallowed *Out of the Night* hook, line, and sinker. But when a guy has one cheek gouged by a snake and then ceremoniously offers the other, I think someone ought to tell him off. For the sake of the record, at least, someone ought to tell off Mr. Fred T. Marsh, reviewer for the Sunday book section of the New York *Herald Tribune*. In his unhappy—and yet ridiculous—plight there is a moral for every member of the reviewing fraternity.

In the *Herald Tribune* for April 26, Mr. Marsh reviewed Valtin's fizzles-dizzles follow-up, *Bend in the River*. This book, according to the reviewer, contains the "early writings" of Richard Krebs, alias Valtin, when he was "an undergraduate of the university of San Quentin prison. . . ." Mr. Marsh hailed these criminalia with unmitigated enthusiasm. He found in them the heart of a poet pining away for three years in jail. Here was "a valid document both as to literature and life" that "should put the cynics in their place." Here, gloated the reviewer, was final proof of Krebs-Valtin's shining integrity of spirit and scrupulous devotion to fact.

Had Mr. Marsh clung to the public record, his panegyric would have been more impressive. By noting that Valtin was convicted under the "criminal syndicalism" act of California, he makes it appear that the author under review was the victim of political prosecution. The fact is that this "surprisingly sensitive" poet was convicted in 1926 of assaulting a storekeeper in Los Angeles after an attempted robbery. But we can let that go for the moment. It's not the main point.

The main point is that Mr. Marsh is so intrigued by the poetry of this author's soul, he is so convinced that this book is an answer to "cynics" who distrusted *Out of the Night*, that it does not occur to him to use the protective device of quotation marks. In his review he says, categorically and on his own responsibility, that two prisoners at San Quentin, Ernest Booth and Roy Sloan, "went wrong on release."

But on May 24, those readers who got as far as the last page of the book section, were confronted with "A Correction" by the editors. In a documented, forceful letter, Ernest Booth protested the statement by Fred T. Marsh "which is absolutely false, unjust, and so close to libel I cannot permit it to stand unchallenged." Describing his admirable record since his release, Mr. Booth declared

that the reviewer's statement had caused him grief and damage: "In many editorial offices it will be accepted at face value."

Now here is the tip-off. The *Herald Tribune* apologizes for its reviewer by pointing out that his statement was based on a passage in Valtin's book which linked Mr. Booth up with a murder. Then the paper regrets Valtin's "mistaken understanding." And now everybody is supposed to be happy.

Everybody, that is, except Mr. Booth, who has been seriously maligned, and the readers of the newspaper, who have been advised that the absolutely authentic book of a few weeks ago is not so absolutely authentic after all. And those readers must be asking themselves: Who, then, in the name of all that's good and glorious, is the "cynic"? The oft-convicted liar Krebs-Valtin; the reviewer who endorses and circulates slanders in the spirit of high truth; or Mr. Joe Doakes, the reader, who insists on calling a liar, quite simply and without adornment, a liar?

I'll take my chances with the third fellow, and it is my unsolicited recommendation that all reviewers stick it out with him. And possibly Mr. Fred T. Marsh is, at this late hour, sufficiently disenchanted with the poet of San Quentin to trail along with the rest of us.

A BOOK may be damned with faint praise. It may also be damned with muddy praise, and I offer as Exhibit A the review of Vladimir Pozner's *The Edge of the Sword* in the *Saturday Review of Literature*. One gathers that the reviewer, Lon Tinkle, liked the book on the whole. So far so good: excellent appraisal of an excellent book. But hold on a minute.

In paragraph one the book offers "no clarification of the reasons for France's downfall. . . ." In paragraph two "The interpretation is there, without any doubt, but Pozner doesn't give it to you in statement." In one passage the French officers "take all the blame

here." In another passage we meet "Bissieres of the Armaments Control Board, an industrialist whose one aim in life is to liquidate every remnant of the Popular Front of 1936," and Carvin "the archetype of bureaucratic bourgeoisie."

How account for such arrant confusions and contradictions in one relatively short review? The answer is that Mr. Tinkle, the reviewer, is unwilling to accept the basic premises of the story he likes and is attempting to rewrite it in the process of summarizing it. He says that "Pozner's preoccupation with Caillol doubtless explains the notable absence in *The Edge of the Sword* of any national feeling for France." Now this is indeed curious. It was my impression that the underlying drive of the novel was a strong patriotic feeling for France and consequently a deep sense of outrage at those who were responsible for her collapse. But suppose one grants the "notable absence" of such feeling. Mr. Tinkle says this is due to the author's preoccupation with a working class organizer and anti-fascist. Who then would represent national feeling? Colonel Carvin?—(since "The conflict between Caillol and Colonel Carvin is the central symbol of the book"). But as the reviewer himself notes, at the moment of France's mortal crisis in June 1940, in the very midst of disastrous invasion, the worker and Popular Frontist Caillol "represents, more than the Germans, what he (Colonel Carvin) most fears in the world."

And there it is in a nutshell. The supporter of France's "200 families" fears the French people more than he does the Nazis. That is the story of France's betrayal, and that is at the heart of Pozner's exciting novel. That is why Caillol and the other men of the ranks are the obvious and necessary expressions of a national feeling for France in the six weeks of 1940 that the book describes. One either sees that or one tosses the novel out the window. To attempt, as reviewer Tinkle does, to rearrange the facts of life and the premises of fiction, is fair neither to the author nor the reader. Nor is it flattering to the reviewer.

I CAN'T resist citing a third moral for reviewers. Orville Prescott, who alternates with John Chamberlain in the daily reviews of the New York *Times*, furnishes the text. The other day Mr. Prescott reviewed *Flight to Freedom*, a volume of reminiscences by Barbara Padowicz, whom he describes as a Polish aristocrat. It appears that this volume includes another of those tedious "Escape from the Soviet" episodes with which pub-



lishers and movie producers used to insult our intelligence. But here it is again, anno 1942. Says Mr. Prescott: "... they had exchanged Gauleiters and the Gestapo for commissars and the GPU" and life now seemed even bleaker for Barbara Padowicz. Life in the Soviet Union, land of her refuge—this was in 1940—seemed grubby compared with "even as poor a capitalist country as Poland." All of which, I submit, is odious, vile, and downright disgusting. To slander at this moment a people whose blood is being spilled for the freedom of mankind is not excusable even in the book review, which seems to have become the last refuge of libelers. I don't see why Orville Prescott, just because he writes for the *Times*, should be exempt from reading the firsthand Moscow dispatches of Ralph Parker that appear in his paper and magnificently refute the Barbara Padowicz's of this world.

Some weeks ago Bennett Cerf, president of Random House, reminded publishers and booksellers of their moral and patriotic responsibility to get rid of these viperous books that spread the Hitler poison against our Soviet ally. And just the other day, Archibald MacLeish urged upon a convention of booksellers their responsibility to evaluate their wares not as counters over the cashbox but as repositories of truth. By and large, there has been a healthy change in the book world since June of last year. I think book reviewers can chip in more than they sometimes do. The Padowicz book reaches relatively few people; but its slurs at our great ally are circulated among hundreds of thousands of readers through Mr. Prescott. The same goes for Mr. Marsh. After all, you don't have to carry a gun to feel yourself a soldier of the United Nations.

Rodgers' *Awake and Other Wartime Poems*. Some of the poems in this volume were written before the war, others more recently. Rodgers is a young Ulsterman better acquainted at this time than any American poet is likely to be with the actual meaning of war itself. The first edition of this book was destroyed in an enemy bombing raid. And Rodgers has the dubious distinction of being hailed as the Rupert Brooke of this later war. He is technically well equipped, better equipped than Brooke ever was. But he has, alas, been educated in poetry by the English intellectual poets—Auden in particular. His real world is distinctly that of the disillusioned middle class. His acceptance of social reform is an intellectual acceptance first and foremost. And consequently there is much in the longer poems in this book which is pure rhetoric (an attempt to convince others) rather than actual vision, imagination, or emotional faith in a better future for mankind.

The rhythms here are often the down-beat rhythms of disillusionment. The imagery is composed rather than felt "ten-league boots on brutality," "oiled eyes," "syrupy event," "sought in cinemas," "trapped intrepid man." Actually this language reminds one of the artificial pseudo-classic language as first employed by the very early romantics in pieces about common man. And the poems which are truly successful here are not those of intellectual message artfully contrived, but such poems as "Beagles," in which the image of the hunted animal becomes the image of hunted man—and because Rodgers has seen and felt this fact emotionally.

As for poems of propaganda, one must honor this poet for trying to convey a message of which intellectually he is convinced:

*And let us like the trapped intrepid man
Who on the prairie hears the holocaust roar
And sees his horizons running to meet him
In mutinous flames, while the still grasses fill
With rills of refugees, let us calmly
Stand now to windward, and here at our feet
Stooping, light fires of foresight that will clean
And clear the careless ground before us
Of Privilege. So will that other Fate
Arriving find no hold within our state,
And we on our ringed ground its roar will
wait
Freely. Awake! before it is too late.*

This is deliberate anti-fascist war poetry, but it is intellectual poetry. And purely intellectual poetry is never very important artistically. It has the further fault of not touching anything but the upper brain cells. It is not emotionally moving. W. R. Rodgers, rid of his contrived imagery, searching the actual world of sight and sound and smell and the language of the people who love freedom, may come through. He is turned in the right direction. But he had better stop talking about the "scathing winds of hate," "lariat intellect," "grass skirt insularity," if he wants to communicate to the English-speaking common people anything at all.

EDA LOU WALTON.

BOOKS IN REVIEW

Nothing New Under the Sun

SHAKESPEARE IN HARLEM, by Langston Hughes. Knopf. \$2.50.

BE ANGRY AT THE SUN, by Robinson Jeffers. Random House. \$2.50.

AWAKE AND OTHER WARTIME POEMS, by W. R. Rodgers. Harcourt Brace. \$1.50.

NONE of these three books is really something new under the sun. Both Langston Hughes and Robinson Jeffers, in their totally different ways, are writing as they always have. Mr. Rodgers is younger and this is his first book. But not even this young poet has achieved either a new way of communicating his feeling about the world as it is now or, surely, a new vision of this world. With history moving so rapidly, poets are, of course, having difficulty in writing at all, for poetry is not mere reporting. Any poem must convey an idea made feeling, and through words and rhythms which are sufficiently emotionalized to stir the reader. Poetry, in other words, requires time for gestation.

If a poet needs a history, a culture, something implicit and of some duration to communicate, the Negro poet has this. His problem is old, his cause just. The culture out of which he writes is more or less homogeneous. The symbols of race suffering and oppression are well understood.

This new collection of Langston Hughes' "blues songs" is not unlike his earlier collections. These are the known lonely songs and rhythms of his people, their love songs too. Back of the simple rhythms lies suffering. The poems are close to folk song. It may be said, however, that they probably had been in preparation for some time. They indicate no awareness of the changed war world, they are not even profoundly class or race-conscious. I think on the whole they are a little too easily composed. Folk poetry is always the picture of a people. But a poet like Langston

Hughes should have something more to say than is said in these strummed out "blues songs" which can too easily be listened to and do not call forth enough thought.

Robinson Jeffers is entirely consistent. All of his long poems have expressed the anarchistic individualist's annoyance with the modern world. Long ago Jeffers said flatly that he was more impressed by Nietzsche than by Christ, by Freud than by Marx or Lenin. He understood, he said, the guns and the airplanes better than any of the economic theories for "Utopia."

Jeffers is a clear example of the poet who remains a romantic and anarchistic individualist in times which turn to other forms of thinking. He is as disillusioned about this culture as Eliot, but he thinks man should return to the primitive and solitary. Nor does he retreat in this last volume which was, undoubtedly, composed before Pearl Harbor. His position is isolationist, anti-Roosevelt. He has a vague admiration for Churchill aroused and England aroused. He understands (or thinks he does) Hitler, the madman and dreamer. He sees his generation after this war as wandering between the "dogs" of Europe and the "policemen" of America. His sons are war age and he hates the war for that reason. But he has long held that our civilization was crashing, must crash, and has believed in Spengler and the cyclic theory of the rise and fall of cultures, races, etc. So much for his ideas. As for his poetry it is prosaic, looser than usual in structure, flat-footed and weary. And this book will feed emotionally only those who can look toward a god of violence and enjoy the fury of storm because they desire the nervous exhaustion and oblivion which follow. Fortunately these are not many. Jeffers has been over-rated. He is communicating only to such as, being sick, would have sensation at any price, even the price of death.

The best book in this group is W. R.