

What to Read

CONTEMPORARY VERSE ventures the opinion that Contemporary Verse is the best poetry magazine we have. And I believe it is true. Not for any of the usual reasons—sapient editing, an enlightened clientele, high ideals. I can't discover that it has any ideals at all; I know of nobody besides myself and Braithwaite (the modern improvement upon and substitute for the gentle reader) who has ever read it; perhaps its merit depends mainly on the obvious absence of editing. It seems to have no standards. Its tastes are more omnivorous than catholic. Has it been publicly admitted that there is a covert danger in standards? The transition from trial by merit to trial by fire, water, or religious and political scruples is too deadly easy. Other magazines of verse have set out to publish the best, which being interpreted means the best submitted to them as they see it. An editor reserves the right to use his human judgment in one field; before long he is using it not only to exclude bad verses but also to exclude the doctrines of transubstantiation and Bolshevism. Without knowing it he is likely to ride hobbies, propagate his special theses, and refuse to publish any poem containing spondees or amphibrachs. It is much safer for an editor never to look at the manuscript until the issue is safely out. Only by this method is the invaluable law of natural selection given free play. Contemporary Verse is the solitary instance of unhidden poetical flowering. It prints indifferently exquisite and execrable. It plays no favorites. At least—I have no intimate information—the result indicates this method. And I repeat that year by year or month by month it is the most successful of our magazines of verse. Every reader is his own editor. He may pick his particular wheat from out the chaff of his aversions. It is as interesting as the May woods. It is life in the rough, nothing omitted. There are bound to be good things in it.

When you cut the pages of Poetry, A Magazine of Verse, you know very well what you will find. Tart tang of originality at any cost on every page. Miss Monroe specializes in the unique. She has a reputation to maintain for startling things, and several theories of prosody to support by an astute distribution of acceptances. It was of course Poetry that first published Lindsay's early burlesque concerning the entrance of General William Booth into heaven. The magazine is no doubt properly proud of its record for a succession of smashing Opus 1's. It has a record also for innovations that passed into the usage of current literature. It has never forgotten nor forgiven itself that a bourgeoisie weekly should have brought out Spoon River just across the state line. This indeed was the great failure of its career. It has survived, but with a difference. It tends in these later days toward a querulous infallibility. It cannot admit that it was ever taken in by so palpable a fraud as the Spectrist School. It inclines even to pontificate a little in the eremite retirement of Chicago. With unction it elects its saints and gathers reverently its private collection of martyr's bones.

As Poetry is likewise A Magazine of Verse, so is Youth also Poetry of Today. The subtitles are as confusing as they are hard to remember. If the first is not self-condemnatory it is redundant. If the second is not vague it is swashing. The editors of Youth have taken this neglected earth and heaven of ours as their province, confidently, heroically. It is symbolic of their all-inclusive-

ness that they should open fire with Edwin Arlington Robinson and Amy Lowell. They have arranged to represent America, likewise the American universities, and, as an added bagatelle, the continent of Europe. The effect is occasionally that of a small voice crying in a very large wilderness. But it is a hopeful venture, toward which the most cynical must feel kindly. Growing up will discourage them; meanwhile there is a freshness as of the first rain-wind about their spontaneous choice of verses and unabashed criticism. They are not so far fearful of making strategic mistakes. The problem of circulation is still to them merely a problem of the maintenance of excellence. They are under no traditional obligation to produce successive thrillers as the price of going on. A saving lack of perspective makes it possible for them to greet polyphonic prose as an epoch-dating invention.

But titanic plans are not rare in these our times. The publishers of the Lyric aim "to so organize the readers of poetry in America as to ensure a wider reading circle for our poets and a more decent compensation for their work." It is to be remarked that the organization of poetry readers ought to prove a task at least as difficult as interesting. Nor is the Sonnet a laggard, attempting, as it says, to put forth the best sonnets written in English. Out of so much faith and works something must come to pass of which we shall not be ashamed. It should not discourage us completely that there seems something trumped-up about these beginnings. A self-conscious culture is always ill at ease. The Gaelic revival in Ireland was nearly as artificial—yet it stimulated and included in passing a writer of plays greater than any other in English since 1616.

Neither the Little Review nor the Midland publishes poetry alone, but each makes a distinctive contribution to the renaissance. The Midland specializes in quiet. Did Robert Frost write about the middle west he would be its ideal contributor. As it is, Edwin Ford Piper, using Frost's technique, pours his whole output into this friendly medium, and sets a restful tone. Restful and gray. The middle westerner always wears a black tie. He wears black socks and a gray suit. Whatever happens he intends to avoid the bizarre. And his poetry matches his clothes. The Little Review has no objection to dazzling you. It is out to gain hot enemies and ardent friends. It makes "no compromise with public taste," meaning thereby no doubt the cult of the gray suit. Its color scheme is symptomatic of continual hunger after the unattainable ultra-violet. It prints all the yellows, purples, and greens that border on its heart's desire, hoping to stumble somehow on the esoteric formula of forbidden vibrations. The editor holds that our æsthetic souls are to be saved by prestidigitation alone. Like certain cinema actors, the contributors make their artistic effects by agility. They are indoor reformers. They run up the papered wall with ease and pick June roses from the chandeliers. All this is excellent and we enjoy it. It keeps us in good mental condition. It is far better than an evening of solemn digestive discussion, followed by solemn asthmatic panting on the way up stairs. There seem to be, happily, some types of radicalism that even long life cannot cure. There are idol-smashers by instinct. Like the rich they are always with us. When I read the Little Review it makes me a little sad that I was afflicted with a curable variety, and seem to be getting over it.

SALANN.

Books and Things

IN the preface to *Studies in Literature* (Putnam's, \$2.50) Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch says he "cannot quarrel with any critic who may find the word 'studies' too important for a volume which consists, in the main, of familiar discourses: and will only plead that it was chosen to cover not this book alone but a successor of which some part of the contents may better justify the general title." The explanation is not necessary. None save an exceptionally stupid critic will think the title of this charming book too important for its contents. Each of the lectures and essays here collected is, to be sure, a familiar discourse, but so is everything likely to be which Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch writes about literature. His most serious "studies," whose claim to such a title no one would think of disputing, have an agreeable ease, a casual air, which makes them as "familiar" as his slightest things. The essay on Swinburne, the solidest part of these *Studies in Literature*, is in this sense as "familiar" as the thinnest lecture in the volume, on *The Poetry of George Meredith*. Sir Arthur is a scholar who keeps in his scholarship the bearing of a well-read gentleman, whose manner of making a subject his own persuades us, as we read, that it is also ours. We are wrong, of course, but the mistake continues to be pleasant even after we have discovered it.

My only quarrel with the book is that the articles written to be heard suffer, in one respect, from comparison with the articles written to be read. The reprinted essays on Coleridge, Matthew Arnold and Swinburne have as much "fluidity and sweet ease" as the lectures delivered by the King Edward VII Professor of English Literature in the University of Cambridge. It is the lectures that suffer by the juxtaposition. "And Mysticism is—well, Mysticism, Gentlemen, is something we will discuss in our next lecture." "I propose in my next lecture, Gentlemen, to start by examining one most important poem of Vaughan's, which will lead us on to deal expeditiously with Traherne, Quarles, the two Fletchers, Crashaw, and maybe one or two other poets on this line of spiritual ancestry." Twice Sir Arthur quotes the whole of George Herbert's "Love bade me welcome." Once in a while he makes a joke not better than this: "But if by a stretch of fancy we can conceive Hegel or Comte or Bergson or any of these constructives as knowing all about it, why then Hegel or Comte or Bergson is theoretically as good as God—and then, the Lord stiffen, for us all, the last barrier between theory and practice!" One notices these things the more because the essays written to be printed are so free from them. Compared with the closeness of the Swinburne the texture of the lectures appears a little too loose.

Nobody, I hope, will accuse me of offering that sentence about Hegel and Bergson as a fair sample of the author's humor. It is a sample most unfair. His humor is one of his most agreeable qualities. "I must here, however, avow my belief," he writes in his preface, "that before starting to lay down principles of literature or aesthetic a man should offer some evidence of his capacity to enjoy the better and eschew the worse. The claim, for the moment fashionable, that a general philosophy of aesthetic can be constructed by a thinker who, in practice, cannot distinguish Virgil from Bavius, or Rodin from William Dent Pitman, seems to be to presume a credulity almost beyond the dreams of illicit therapeutics." Could any one have hit upon a happier contrast to Rodin than William Dent Pitman, who would prolong his evenings "far into the night, now dashing off . . . a volunteer bust ('in marble,

as he would gently but proudly observe) of some public character, now stooping his chisel to a mere *nymph* ('for a gas-bracket on a stair, sir'), or a life-size *Infant Samuel* for a religious nursery"? It was William Dent Putman who said "an occasional model would only disturb my ideal conception of the figure, and be a positive impediment in my career." We have all met the aesthetician who cannot distinguish William Dent Pitman from Rodin. The Goncourts were inclined to think, most unfairly, that they had met him in the person of Hippolyte Adolphe Taine. They even represent Turgeniev as a partaker in their opinion. Taine on art, says Turgeniev in the Goncourt journal, if I remember the story correctly, "reminds me of a pointer I once had in Russia. He went out with me day after day, he pointed, he went through all the proper motions. Only, he had no nose."

It is this kind of critic that Sir Arthur most distrusts and least resembles. When he comes nearest to "laying down principles of literature or aesthetic" he is least near his own particular wisdom and soundness. "But when we go a step further yet, and convert our epithets of opinion—'classical,' 'romantic'—into abstract nouns—'classicism,' 'romanticism'—I would point out to you, with all the solemnity at my command that we are at once hopelessly lost: lost, because we have advanced a vague concept to the pretence of being a thing; hopelessly lost, because we have removed our concept out of the range of the *thing*; which is not only what matters, but the one and single test of our secondary notions. 'The play's the *thing*.' Hamlet, Lycidas or The Cenci is the *thing*. Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley did not write 'classicism' or 'romanticism.' They wrote Hamlet, Lycidas, The Cenci." To realize that Sir Arthur is out of his depth we have only to contrast this passage with the words of a writer who is both a man of taste and a thinker, with Santayana's words: "If the discovery of new perfections is to be called romanticism, then romanticism is the beginning of all aesthetic life. But if by romanticism we mean indulgence in confused suggestion and in the exhibition of turgid force, then there is evidently need of education, of attentive labor, to disentangle the beauties so vaguely felt, and give each its adequate embodiment."

When I call Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, considered as a literary critic, a man of taste and not a thinker, all I mean is that his mere preferences, his likings and dislikes, matter a good deal to other men, and that the reasons he gives for his preferences matter all the way from less to not at all. Good taste, you may say, is the taste most like your own, but I think you speak lazily, in forgetfulness of that humility which is our common portion. A man of taste, I should say, were I to try my hand at a superficial description, is a man who somehow or other makes us uneasy when we disagree with him. One of Sir Arthur's attractive traits is his gift for doing this without giving us a disagreeable sense of our own inferiority.

This, I admit, does not take us very far. It does not tell us anything about the two kinds of good taste, that which tries to keep good taste from changing and that which tries to change it. Sir Arthur's place is among the conservatives. He is strictly first-hand, his preferences are his own, he has his heresies, but on the whole it is true of him that upon sensations and choices like his the long-established reputations have been built. He feels afresh what the other good judges have felt. And when I add that he is a highly cultivated man of taste I mean that he remembers, close to the moment of reading and enjoying, other things read which have given him a similar or contrasting pleasure.