

## Three Poets and a Few Opinions

WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THE FIRST work of Wallace Stevens began to appear in that exciting period just before the late great War which is sometimes referred to as the Poetic Renaissance in America. His first printed poems may have appeared in a small magazine then edited by Alfred Kreymborg and entitled *Others*. He was also an early contributor to the late Harriet Monroe's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. He has always been an elusive poet, but his work has a particular flavor and savor of its own. In most cases a taste for it must be acquired, but once acquired a new book by Wallace Stevens can be deeply relished. What he supplies is original design, pure color, and pure music. He comes near fulfilling what George Moore, some time ago, tried rather cloudily to describe as "pure poetry." Mr. Stevens can always create a highly original atmosphere around a subject. One does not go to him for direct discourse, but for meanings like Chinese boxes concealed one inside the other, for improvisations with language that are akin to musical improvisations and also to modern painting. Mr. Stevens avoids the obvious with incessant alertness. He is a virtuoso and voluptuary of language.

Some of us can delight in the way a thing is said without worrying too haggardly as to *what* is said. Such people can enjoy, for instance, the following opening of Mr. Stevens's *Academic Discourse at Havana*. Others find such writing either intensely irritating or simply bewildering:

*Ideas of Order*. By Wallace Stevens. Knopf. \$2.00.  
*Cliff Pace and Other Poems*. By Thomas Caldecot Chubb. \$2.00.  
*Stand with Me Here*. By Robert Francis. \$1.75.

Canaries in the morning, orchestras  
 In the afternoon, balloons at night, That is  
 A difference, at least, from nightingales,  
 Jehovah and the great sea-worm. The air  
 Is not so elemental nor the earth  
 So near.

But the sustenance of the wilderness  
 Does not sustain us in the metropolises.

Later on in the same poem Mr. Stevens asks:

Is the function of the poet here mere sound,  
 Subtler than the ornatest prophecy,  
 To stuff the ear?

If the reader is inclined to shout "Yes!" he is far too hasty; for the poem thoroughly read, and it runs to four pages, is found to build up just the sort of original atmosphere to which I have referred above, until we are in that particular place and no other and can appreciate all it suggests. Most of the thirty-six poems here present are not nearly so long, though one of the best, *The Idea of Order at Key West*, which is almost pure music, is longish. The poet's attitude toward the epoch in which he finds himself comes out most clearly in *Mozart, 1935*.

If they throw stones upon the roof  
 While you practice arpeggios,  
 It is because they carry down the stairs  
 A body in rags.  
 Be seated at the piano.

This poem ends with a statement which happens to appeal particularly to me, because I am of Mr. Stevens's time, and it seems to me a natural feeling under the circumstances.

We may return to Mozart.  
 He was young, and we, we are old.

The snow is falling  
And the streets are full of cries.  
Be seated, thou.

You will perceive that this man is an esthete (new style) but he has also a quality that pleases me. It is often quite difficult to tell whether he is serious or not. As for beauty, he has seen the most bizarre beauty everywhere. He has a whole pavilion all to himself in modern poetry. Within the last few years, James Stephens, the Irish poet, acclaimed him as one of our very best. The book under discussion was first published by the Alcestis Press in a strictly limited edition. The same press has more recently brought out a later volume, *Owls' Clover*, that has not yet been released to the general public.

Thomas Caldecot Chubb is a Connecticut Yankee now living in Georgia, but the South has set its impress on his work. As my brother has said, he knows both "turkey-gobbler land and the New England hills." He likes the peculiarities in people. He has written four other volumes, poetry and prose, but this one seems his best of verse. He was at Yale during the time of Thornton Wilder, and Archie MacLeish, and Phil Barry, a literary period at that university which has not since been equaled. Mr. Chubb seems to have worked through a period during which his poetry was rather derivative or lacked any individual characteristic. He is writing of two kinds of country of which he is fond. He has picked up the Southern vernacular and uses it easily and well in the title poem about the man who loved dogs and trained them. He ingeniously contrasts the New England and the Georgian spring. In another poem, this time *Praise of New England*, he declares:

Let me now make a saying about New England, running north to  
Vermont,

Running west to the cleft rocks of Maine, being shielded by  
Cape Cod,  
The bent right arm of a fighter that wards off heavy blows:  
It is a firm land and a solid land, a land worth the knowing.

In May in Georgia he recollects New Hampshire but knows also just how the Southern spring comes north "from the blue Caribbean." A westbound freight is also vocal to him, and he knows how Wenatchee apples "have traveled far for their dream." He has traveled in foreign countries and remembers them, and particularly Italy that beguiles him into writing poems of praise and making translations. He can write also acceptably of Byron's first love, Mary Chaworth, and of our own Mark Twain.

Mr. Chubb tries various rhythms, rhyme and non-rhyme. His touch is not always certain. Some of his rhymes are old counters and his ear fails him sometimes. There are carelessnesses. Sometimes he does not know when to end a poem, as in *Seagull*, where the final verse is banal and unnecessary. Yet the picture of the fox in his last poem, *Wild Animal*, is quite precise. At least there is plenty of variety in this book; and the poet having improved thus far, I feel he will grow still further as a craftsman.

In *Stand With Me Here*, Robert Francis has a little debt to pay to Robert Frost, but I find again, as I found on first reading it late last summer, a certain individuality and freshness in the book for which one is grateful. This is a wise notation on *Walls*:

A passerby might just as well be blind.  
These walls are walls no passer sees behind.  
Or wants or needs to want to see behind.  
Let the walls hide what they are there to bind.  
Out-of-sight they say is out-of-mind.  
The walls are cruel and the walls are kind.

The people portrayed in the sixth section have their fascination. I like his country sights such as *Onion Fields*, *Apple Gatherers*, and *Pitch Pine*. This is a good counsel to artists, originally put, in *Cloud In Woodcut*:

Make a woodcut of a cloud.  
Polish the wood. Point the knife.  
But let your wilful cloud retain  
Evidence of woody grain.  
Teach your knife to compromise.  
Let your cloud be cloud — and wood.  
Grained in the art let there be life.

That small poem is as admirably carved as a good wood-cut, and other poems by Mr. Francis have this same quality. I would not overpraise this first book, but the poet is a philosopher worth listening to and has, in his own words, drunk at perennial springs.

I have been asked to say a few words about my general impression of the present state of poetry in the United States. To judge by all the books and all the small magazines of poetry I am constantly seeing, there are certainly plenty of aspirants! And it seems to me that already the youngest poets are making themselves heard. It was not so long ago that we found fresh utterance in the work of Paul Engle and Jesse Stuart. Since then we have had such various younger writers as James Agee, the metaphysical, Kenneth Fearing, the radical, Muriel Rukeyser, a young woman of startling talents, and Margaret Barker. There are at least half a dozen poets and poems in Anne Winslow's well-conceived anthology, *Trial Balances*, that show new and impressive talent among the very young. In the latest book of Columbia poetry I was especially taken with the poems of Elizabeth Bohm, and a graduate student at the University of California, Josephine Miles, is unusually gifted. I have read the work of Kimball

Flaccus, Lionel Wiggam, Kenneth Patchen and Edwin Rolfe (the two latter again among our best proletarian poets) with a feeling that the youngsters were strongly making their way.

Poetry has gone through a phase of over-intellectualization which resulted in almost intolerable cryptograms, a phase in which the attempt was made to negate the emotions and speak entirely, as young C. Day Lewis has put it, "the private language of personal friends." That phase is passing. Poets are, one might say, coming out more into the open. If the world needs poets, so do poets need an audience. They cannot exist in a vacuum. They have made all sorts of experiments in trying to invent a new language, most of them futile. As a matter of fact I shall always contend that the English tongue in its traditional usage — which does not mean any stale use of language — suffices for the most powerful and profound things man has to say in that tongue. I believe in experiments in form, but I do not believe that poetry can achieve the effects of music, and I do not believe that its aim should be mere intellectual nuance. At any rate, it seems to me at the moment an art that is distinctly alive, despite the prophecies some years ago of those who thought it failing. Naturally it is trying to adapt itself to a changed world, and cannot interpret that world in the old manner. Max Eastman fairly recently cudgelled the poets amusingly and rather unmercifully for their unscientific point of view and method. But science deals, in so far as possible, with the statement of fact, and poetry will always deal in suggestion. I do not think that the poets of today arrogate unto themselves what Mr. Eastman calls "the quintessence of wisdom." The time when the poet was also a major prophet, stalking about in a mysterious black cloak, is quite over, and has been for

some time. Poets simply make certain observations about life as they understand it, and anyone has the privilege of differing violently with their conclusions. Occasionally they seize or strike a spark. Otherwise they write more or less interesting verse. But the pleasure of writing and of reading verse is so deeply ingrained in the spirit of man that I do not foresee an age of nothing but prose!

## The Colonial Period

SAMUEL ELIOT MORISON

**I**N THIS, the second volume of his full-length history of England's American colonies, the fruit of a lifetime's research and study, Professor Andrews includes the founding and seventeenth-century history of the second group of New England colonies (Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Haven), and of the earliest successful proprietary colonies (Barbados and Maryland). It is written from the same imperial point of view, with the same ripe and careful scholarship, and in the same concise and polished style as the first volume in the series, which won the Pulitzer prize for 1935.

Mr. Andrews is a realist in history. He has no particular axe to grind, or theory to expound. He is not interested in the colonies as nuclei of American democracy or even of American independence; they are not "seeds" of anything, but seventeenth-century communities founded by Englishmen overseas, and essentially English in their personnel, institutions, religion, and social organization. They were, and regarded themselves as, integral parts of the English empire; even Rhode Island, the least dependent and most radical of the lot in religion and politics, was only saved from partition among her neighbors by an English charter and the protection of the English government. Maryland as well as Rhode Island was a social experiment, but in the one instance as the other, Mr. Andrews points out that the experiment in great measure failed. The one colony became less tolerant and Catholic, and the other less tolerant and radical as time went on, so that by the open-

*The Colonial Period of American History. Volume II. By Charles M. Andrews. Yale University Press. \$4.00.*