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A London Letter

By LOUIS UNTERMEYER

COMING back to London after a year's absence I find it is no longer considered good form to talk about literature. The more determinedly intelligent among the intelligentsia are several leaps ahead of Gilbert Seldes and his "Seven Lively Arts." Even the latest of light arts, far from being lively, is appraised (if considered at all) in terms of the lugubrious. "Technique" is something applied to a "system" at roulette; "form" concerns a cricket match; "style" is mere "shop" and, hence, taboo. This, of course, is only relatively true; contrariwise, the publishers' announcements have seldom been so bright and (as one of them confided to me) so "American" in tone. Moreover, it was pleasant to arrive in the midst of a controversy—two of them in fact.

The first of these was provoked by the annual H. G. Wells novel and centres about H. G. in general. Once more, he has introduced "real characters" in what the critics variously judge to be a work of fiction, a piece of polemics, a diary of oddments, an essay in education, and a system of philosophy. Meanwhile, Ernest Benn, Ltd., has forced a reconsideration of the newest and the earliest Wells by accomplishing a minor miracle in book-manufacture. "The Short Stories of H. G. Wells" is a volume of more than eleven hundred pages; it contains sixty-three tales (some of them as long as "The Time Machine"); it is not only carefully but decoratively printed; and it sells for seven shillings, sixpence! The collection, *per se*, is of first importance—especially for even the sketchiest estimate of Wells. Considered only as a prophet of the material world, this volume establishes him. It is true that the theory of time as a fourth dimension did not originate with him, but the central motif of "The Time Machine" brings the reader closer to Einstein than all the subsequent interpreters. The tanks, those armored behemoths, first startled an incredible world during the Great War, but "The Land Ironclads" was first published in 1903. Yet it is not as either prophet or politician that Wells bids fair to survive, but as teller of some of the most extraordinary fairy tales that ever delighted adults. Rarely have fantasy and horror been so delicately combined as in "The Valley of Spiders" or "Pollock and the Porrah Man" or "Jimmy Goggles the God" or "The Plattner Story." But—and here the young and quite forgotten romancer will prove to be a Wells of purest fancy undeffiled to this generation—"The Door in the Wall," "The Magic Shop," "The Country of the Blind" (possibly the finest short story in the language) reveal, what so few of his critics have acknowledged, the instinctive lover of beauty. Countless essays (and at least four books) have been written about Wells the Educator, Wells the Agitator, Wells the Bourgeois Realist, Wells the Historian, Wells the This, That, and the Other. But I do not recall any examination—and this collection will be sure to force one—of Wells the Poet.

Poetry furnished the setting for the other controversy and Humbert Wolfe was its centre. Wolfe had already published some half-dozen volumes which critics had definitely praised and readers had, even more definitely, refused to read. "Kensington Gardens," for example, was the sort of volume that, unlike Barrie or Milne, should have appealed to the admirers of both. The public, however, would have little or none of it. Whereupon, after two more volumes which made even less impression, Wolfe issued his most difficult and ambitious work, "Requiem," sombre in tone with a structure as involved as a fugue. And "Requiem" promptly went into its sixth printing. This success had little to do with the merits of Wolfe's poetry *qua* poetry and much with the curious reception encountered by the latest volume. The first few reviews hailed "Requiem" with unstinted extravagance and its author as "the greatest living poet." Roused by these superlatives, the opposition denounced Wolfe's rhetoric, his symbolism, his choice of subjects, his "suspended rhymes," his editing of the new series of the Augustan (or Sixpenny) Poets, everything in short except Wolfe's conduct in the Ministry of Labor. The issue was joined with less and less critical judgment; it reached comic proportions when Hugh M'Diarmid (in *The New Age*) accused J. Middleton Murry of having used his (M'Diarmid's)

points of attack as the base of his (Murry's) animadversions in *The Scots Observer*. Whereupon Murry replied by printing in the first issue of his own reorganized quarterly, *The New Adelphi*, the only detached and dispassionate critique of Wolfe that has appeared in England. (The review incidentally was the work of an American, Robert Hillyer.)

Meanwhile, Wolfe's publishers have not allowed their presses (or Wolfe) to remain idle. Wolfe's "Others Abide," two hundred rhymed epigrams from the Greek Anthology, has just been issued and has already been praised by James Stephens; twelve of his new Sixpenny Poets (including Donne and Edward Lear) will make their debut before the end of the year; and as a final exhibit of versatility this indefatigable poet has in preparation a set of metrical stories and satires for children to be called "Cursory Rhymes."

Another disproof of the often-encountered "Poetry doesn't sell" has been vouchsafed by Faber and Gwyer with their Ariel Poems. This series consists of a number of three page booklets (nine of them to date) each of which contains one hitherto unpublished short poem, a colored illustration, and a cover by some well-known artist. The series began with Hardy's "Yuletide in a Younger World" with two drawings by Albert Rutherston, and now includes T. S. Eliot's most recent "Journey of the Magi" (in tone curiously like MacLeish's "Bletheris" and Aiken's later monologues), with drawings by McKnight Kauffer, Chesterton's "Gloria in Profundis," De la Mare's "Alone," and Sassoon's "Nativity." The illustrated pamphlets are extremely decorative and since they cost only a shilling, will probably be used instead of broadsides and Christmas cards.

Hardy continues to defy time and criticism. His "Yuletide in a Younger World" is not merely the best of the poems in the Ariel series, but the freshest. And Hardy is eighty-seven. No wonder there are so few "new" poets. What's the use, the discomfited beginners must cry, when "the grand old man" continues to write younger (and, incidentally, more experimental) verse than the youngest of the newcomers. If Hardy should live to be ninety, his octogenarian work will, in all likelihood prove to be his finest poetry. If he survives his hundredth birthday, the anthologies of the period will contain nothing but selections from Thomas Hardy.

To sound the other extreme, a casual mention of the fact that I was still engaged on a collection of the World's Worst Poetry has brought me countless specimens of the Victorian era. Unfortunately, most of these are assigned to "Anonymous" and, since the work is to be an eminently scholarly one, the sources must be "fixed." Possibly some reader has definite information concerning two glorious but, alas, severed couplets. The first is supposed to have been the climax of a broadside circulated upon the death of Queen Victoria. It runs:

*Dust to dust and ashes to ashes:
Into her tomb the great Queen dashes.*

And this, my informant assured me, was from one of the bucolic idylls by Alfred Austin, once Poet Laureate, but I have been unable to track down the memorable lines:

*Spring has come; the Winter is over:
The cuckoo flower gets mauver and mauver.*

Other things than poetry are making this autumn lively for writers and readers. One hears, on every hand, of Tomlinson's "Gallions Reach," Susan Ertz's "Now East, Now West" (not to be confused with Felix Riesenbergs novel of New York), "Greenlow," by Romer Wilson, J. Middleton Murry's reorganized quarterly, *The New Adelphi*, the forthcoming "Are They the Same at Home?" by the audacious Beverley Nichols. For this reader, however, the fall lists were even more distinguished by the "Collected Poems 1914-1926," of Robert Graves, "Rustic Elegies," by Edith Sitwell, "A Survey of Modernist Poetry," a collaboration by Laura Riding (once Gottschalk) and Robert Graves, the popular reprint of "Selected Poems," by James Elroy Flecker, and A. E. Coppard's exquisitely made "Pelagea." But of these the American publishers will undoubtedly have more to say.

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The Wits' Weekly

Conducted by EDWARD DAVISON

FOR the convenience of readers who perhaps missed last week's announcement of "The Wits' Weekly," the details are reprinted here. Part of this page will, in future, be devoted to a series of Literary Competitions. A new problem will be set each week. Numbers 1 and 2, proposed in our last issue, are repeated below. Number 3 will be set next week.

1. A prize of fifteen dollars is offered for the best serious lyric written in not more than four ordinary limerick stanzas. (*Entries for this competition must be mailed in time to reach THE SATURDAY REVIEW office not later than the morning of October 17th.*)
2. A prize of fifteen dollars is offered for the most characteristic fragment, in not more than 350 words, from the preface to "Columbus—A Comedy," by George Bernard Shaw. (*Entries for this competition must be mailed in time to reach THE SATURDAY REVIEW office not later than the morning of October 24th.*)

The entries for Competition No. 1 will be reviewed and the prize awarded in our issue of October 29.

Intending competitors are advised to read very carefully the rules printed below.

I cannot take any credit to myself for the idea of the test competition which I set last week. Christopher Morley, William Rose Benét, and Leonard Bacon were offered a prize of one cent for

The best short nonsense lyric beginning with the line, "It's daffodil time in New Zealand."

There once was such a lyric. It was written by an undergraduate friend of mine, but, so far as I know, never printed. All that I can now recall is the chorus which was helped out by a tune that must have been begotten by a Salvation Army hymn on a Victorian drawing-room ballad:

It's daffodil time in New Zealand
Down where the kiwi sings,
The homeland, the fair land, the free land,
Whose sons are the scions of kings;
Under the old eucalyptus,
Where the lithe platypi roam
Each southern Spring
Daffodils bring
Mem'ries of Ho-ome Swe-et Ho-ome!

I hope this will not take any wind out of the competitors' sails. Mr. Bacon writes to me asking whether the eland is an Australasian bird; but I am not giving away any hints about rhymes. So far, Mr. Morley has sustained an awful silence, "apart, sat on a hill retired." Personally, I am backing Mr. Benét to win the prize. No outsiders have entered up to the time of writing, but anything may happen before the rival lyrics appear in the next *Saturday Review*.

RULES

(Competitors failing to comply with these rules will be disqualified)

1. Envelopes should be addressed to "The Competitions Editor, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, 25 West 45th Street, New York City." The number of the competition (e.g., "Competition 1") must be written on the top left hand corner.
2. All MSS. must be legible—typewritten if possible—and should bear the name or pseudonym of the author. Only one side of the paper should be used. Prose entries must be clearly marked off at the end of each fifty words. MSS. cannot be returned.
3. *The Saturday Review* reserves the right to print the whole or part of any entry. The decision of the Competitions Editor is final and he can in no circumstances enter into correspondence.

"MODERN readers," says *John O' London's Weekly*, "are apt to imagine that tales of fantastic adventure are of modern growth, but the Greeks in this, as in most forms of literary effort, were our predecessors. The Grecian public was as avid of marvelous adventures as we are: so much so that Lucian, who flourished in the second century A. D., felt compelled to satirize the too-prolific romancers who wrote of their adventures as being actual events. He wrote his 'Veracious History' to poke fun at them and, at the same time, rebuke the public for their credulity. Unfortunately, as he confesses in his preface, he had never had any extraordinary adventures. Still, that is of small disadvantage, for it occurred to him that he might resort to lying as other writers did. But he points out that he differs from his rivals in this: they asserted that their narratives were true; he acknowledged that his story was pure fiction.

He set sail and traversed the Mediterranean in safety till he had passed the Pillars of Hercules (Gibraltar). But soon

after he met with a tremendous storm; the whirlwind carried the ship into the air, and he gave up all hope. But by happy chance he landed on the Moon. . . .

"His description of life on this planet strains credulity. There are no women: children are born from the calf of a man's leg, though some are produced by certain plants. The inhabitants do not die but dissolve into smoke when their days are ended. They can take out their eyes at pleasure. They eat by snuffing up the scent of frogs, which fly about in the air. . . .

"There is no need to multiply his extravagances, which outdo those of Munchausen, who is supposed to have taken some hints from the 'Veracious History.' Oddly enough, Lucian wrote another account of a Voyage to the Moon in one of his 'Dialogues.' In this the Cynic philosopher, Menippus, reached the moon by attaching wings to his shoulders like Icarus. The outrageous adventures of the 'Veracious History' are wanting, and Lucian devotes his pages to a cutting satire on the warring sects of philosophers."

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