

Some Recent Poetry

anarchism is not enough. by laura riding. new york: doubleday, doran & co. 1929. \$2.50.
 NOW THE SKY. By MARK VAN DOREN. New York: Albert & Charles Boni. 1929.
 THE IDOLS. By LAURENCE BINYON. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1929. \$2.

Reviewed by ARCHIBALD MACLEISH

I INTEND no disrespect to a highly successful and eminently dignified publishing house in remarking that it is the "doubleday, doran" that is wrong with Miss Riding's book. Those syllables were never intended to wear the lower case. They look self-conscious and foreign like an Englishman in kilts. And so, and more so, does Miss Riding in her *Modern World*. She knows the country. She has been over it on the map in the libraries and drawing rooms of London. She knows the customs of the country and the proper speech (her best prose has been to school to the best prose of Miss Stein and has the authentic accent). But she has never breathed the air. She is like the students of the history and economics of Spain who have been taught that Spain is a dying country and go there looking for the signs of death. Or the traveller in Switzerland who sees around him everywhere the hardy mountaineers. Mr. Wyndham Lewis is a good friend, a better enemy, and one of the most valuable people living in our time. But he does not write guide books, and readers who take his books as such are bound to be misled.

But Miss Riding can't be dismissed with that rather condescending preface. She is, I believe, about as wrong as it is possible to be. Her analysis accepts, as fundamental and inescapable factors, every sterile, squeamish, and weary tendency of our time. Her fine protest and rebellion turns out in the end to be just another resignation. But she delivers, on the way to that end, some of the heaviest strokes the smug literature of our (possibly) age has ever felt. If indeed it will feel these. She is able to strike through. She is like Mr. Tom Heeney who is able to lead with both hands and his jaw because no fighter on earth has strength enough to hurt him. With the difference that Mr. Heeney's defense is his incredible attachment to life and Miss Riding's is her complete devotion to death.



The beginning of the book is a frank ringing of the sidewalk bell such as attracts one, or is supposed to attract one, to the Paris movies. Miss Riding has a taste for the kind of epigram in which the beginning of the sentence swallows the end: "... inability to distinguish between the interestingness of dull poetry and the dullness of 'interesting' poetry." But this method, though it produces a thickness of utterance, is unobjectionable. If a writer desires to give birth to a sequence of immaculate Minervas it is his own affair. And interest is certainly aroused. No reader, if there is any, of poetry could go very far in Miss Riding's volume without feeling his interest, at least, in operation.

Poetry . . . is the art of not living. It has no system, harmony, form, public significance, or sense of duty. . . . What is a poem? A poem is nothing. . . . Why is it nothing? Because it cannot be looked at, heard, touched, or read (what can be read is prose).

This is alarming and is meant to be. But it is soon explained. Miss Riding is talking about poetry as a method, as a technique of existence. "... poetry is perhaps the only human pursuit left still capable of developing anti-socially." And shortly it appears that the word poetry in Miss Riding's vocabulary means the activity of the "unreal," i.e., "personal, warm, indifferent to effect, . . . inhuman and obscure" self. She makes a division into three: "To put it simply, the unreal is to me poetry. The individual-real is a sensuous enactment of the unreal, opposing a sort of personally cultivated, physical collectivity to the metaphysical, mass-cultivated collectivity of the collective-real." "The collective-real is a man in touch with man. The individual-real is man in touch with the natural in him, in touch with nature." The collective-realists create, by the analogy of history, the picture of the individual as a member of a "democracy": the individual-realists create, by physical analogy, a kind of "Toryish anarchy—the direct communication of a few individuals with the physical world without the intervention of the symbolic species." (And anarchism is not enough.) Mr. Lewis belongs to this second group. "... he is unable to face the final conclusion of individualism: that the individual is

morphologically as well as functionally unreal. . . ." Mr. Eliot belongs to this second group. "Mr. Eliot's position demonstrates clearly the relation of the individual-real to the collective-real: it is a priggish, self-protective minority-attitude to the same material which is the substance of the dogma of the collective-real." And "... the basis of anarchistic individuality is not authentically individualistic, but snobbish." Mrs. Woolf's "To the Lighthouse" is "a perfect example of the individual-real." It merely individualizes the simple reality of nature. And it is real, "mathematically like life," like "natural flesh-life, which must be laboriously, exquisitely, irritatingly, painfully rendered." "All this delicacy of style, it appears, is the expression of an academic, but nevertheless vulgar indelicacy of thought, a sort of Royal Academy nudity. . . ." "... a self-scented, sensuous, unbearably curious self-smelling of flesh."

The feeling, it can hardly be as yet an observation, upon which this structure rests is twice stated.



BOOTH TARKINGTON

Drawing by Joseph Cummings Chase

"Man becomes more man, becomes less nature. He becomes unreal. . . . He is in himself, he is unreal, he is secure." And "we are in a state of semi-conscious transition between nature and nothing, and the more conscious we grow, the nearer we are to nothing." Add to this "Poetry therefore seems idle, sterile, narrow, destroying. And it is. This is what recommends it." There can be no argument with Miss Riding on this subject. Her feeling is emotional and founded on her own life. But her enlargement of her feeling to include the modern world merely stresses her tourist character. It is perfectly true that we are sick men. It is perfectly true that the cause of our sickness is our divorce from the natural world. None but the professionally blind who giggle out their happy vision to a tickled (and lucrative) public could possibly take exception to so much. But it is not true that our present deviation is the great track of our destiny. Nor do the few men who constitute our time in its difference from any other time, take it to be that track. Something of what Miss Riding says of Mr. Eliot's present position might, in other phrasing, be true. Mr. Eliot has become concerned for his own soul and those who most admire his poetry are most aware of his absence. But it is better to attempt to find a foothold in life than to dive like a dead bird into death. And there is, after Mr. Eliot, a contemporary mind which thinks the curve of the ellipse may yet cross ours. Miss Riding would do well to contemplate the painting of Diego Rivera in the chapel of Texcoco. She would find the trip not too long.



If this were all of her volume it would not repay reading. What is interesting in the book is the observation of poetry it permits her. Because she has agreed to be dead she is able to speak. And though much that she says is mere propaganda for her main (and unimportant) argument, much is valuable. She insists on the rebellious and anti-social nature of all true poetry. And that is good. She insists on the non-artistic nature of poetry. And that too is good, and a short answer to the laborious and ineffectual

esthetics in which too civilized poets are tempted to hide. But chiefly and best she is able to give poetry a place out of the reach of prose, out of the world's way, and out of the way of the solemn critics who call all ornate prose poetical. If poetry is the "unreal," the personal, the indifferent to effect; if poetry is the self in its state of neither saying, thinking, knowing, observing, nor organizing more than is self, if poetry is the final, hard, clean, bodiless, essential self, then there is a real criterion for the exclusion of the mock poetry, the mawk poetry which the merely esthetic argument is unable to exclude. The difficulty is to distinguish this "unreal" self of Miss Riding's from the "unknown" self of the *Surréalists* and the "unknowing" self of the natural-genius school, and the "Unknown" Self of the Bright Boys and the neo-Thomist Clubs. This difficulty Miss Riding does not face. The remarks here quoted are therefore not as unambiguous as they seem.

A poem is made out of nothing by a nobody—made out of a socially non-existent element in language.

Poetry is an attempt to make language do more than express; to make it work. . . . If it succeeds in this the problem of communication disappears.

The thought is not Miss Riding's but the truth is hers or anyone's.

Poetry is not an instrument and is not written with the intention of arousing emotions. . . .

Prose is an inclusive medium, its merit depends on its fullness. . . . It is poetry, on the other hand, which is properly harsh, bare, matter-of-fact. . . . The purpose of poetry is to destroy all that prose formally represents.

There is an intention, wilful and "daring" perhaps, academically phrased certainly, in these statements which gives them real importance. Poetry has been elbowed into the corner in England and America. It is permitted to exist only if it is "beautiful" or "profound" or (Oh doubly best of all) "poignant." The essentially prose minds which are put regularly to its criticism among us, require of it that it stir the emotions or that it perform some social function of discovery and enlargement—to regain its right of existence in and by it. . . . necessary that this lady speak a little louder. . . . seems usual, let us give thanks that she is a speaker. It is certain enough beforehand that no one who ought to, will listen to what she says.



Miss Riding's grenade is limited in use, like most such objects, to the attack. It is no help around the desk. Mr. Van Doren would not be pleased to be told that his poems were made out of nothing by a nobody. And the remark, moreover, would be untrue. Mr. Van Doren's poems are made by himself out of his own life. They are very personal poems and that is at once their weakness and their strength. Miss Riding observes that "in the old romanticism the poem was an uncommon effect of common experience on the poet. All interest in the poem centered in this mysterious capacity of the poet for overfeeling, for being overaffected." Like many of her remarks it is only momentarily true, and like all of them it bears a connotation I would not apply to Mr. Van Doren. But it is illuminating. It explains why Mr. Van Doren, though universally admired as a poet is more admired by his elders than by his contemporaries. Not that Mr. Van Doren's elder admirers go back in years to the old romanticism, but that Miss Riding's dividing line is misplaced. It is only in the younger "modern" poets of our own time that the poetic personality has begun to be changed into the poem, or, which amounts to the same thing, made to appear ironically. (It is unimportant here that the irony is generally missed.) Mr. Van Doren, on the other hand, writes as himself. It is always himself telling (with, of course, numerous exceptions). And it is because Mr. Van Doren is a sensitive and obviously unusual person that the poems which tell of his experiences are valuable poems. He thus produces a less pure and perhaps surer poetry. One has a feeling he is writing for posterity, leaving a record of himself. And he may well succeed. Many a personal voice still speaks to us out of past time. His contemporaries, reading what he writes, feel themselves strange. Nothing that has happened to them seems to have happened to him. It is perhaps his great good fortune. That will depend on his contemporaries.

There is no occasion now to speak of the excellence of his verse. That is assumed. It would be expected from the nature of his work that his verse would be rather a means of expression than an end

in itself. And it is true that he rarely writes the purely poetic phrase which like a charm creates the thing it means. But he is none the less a poet. One's only regret is his occasional tendency to write in the ghostly, grammatical manner of Mr. Robinson.

They were still a single room—
But longer now than once it was;

and

Which to punish with her eyes
She turns her head, as if to see
What is to see. . . .

But these are no fair samples of his work. Nor, perhaps, is the poem called "Civil War." And yet between the least valuable poems in the book and this, the best, there is little space.

The country is no country I have seen,
And no man goes there who is now alive, and no man
Ever is going to leave there. . . .

It is a beautiful piece of work. And it is also a poem.

No two volumes could be more strangely brought together in one review than Miss Riding's book and Mr. Binyon's ode. If either one is valuable the other is of no value whatever. If anything that Miss Riding says about poetry is true Mr. Binyon's ode is no poem. And if Mr. Binyon's ode is a poem then nothing Miss Riding says is true. So far as the present reviewer is concerned he prefers not to lose Miss Riding. And he does not flatter himself that his choice will cause Mr. Binyon any great pain. The ode is the kind of cultivated, scholarly, well-bred expression of emotion which will certainly receive the praise of well-bred, scholarly, and cultivated people, and the praise or dispraise of others can hardly be important to its author. Its first five and last four lines give its quality.

Lo, the spirit of a pulsing star within a stone
Born of earth, sprung from night!
Prisoned with the profound fires of the light,
It lives like all the tongues of eloquence
Locked in a speech unknown!

The Body is the Word; nothing divides
This blood and breath from thought ineffable.
Hold me, Eternal Moment!
The Idols fade: the God abides.

Like a Field in Stubble

THE DEVIL IS A WOMAN. By ALICE MARY KIMBALL. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1929. \$2.50.

Reviewed by DAVID McCORD

IF you have ever seen a field in stubble and thought "I like this better than a lawn," you will understand the strength of "The Devil Is a Woman." It seems to me a strong book because its language and the ideas behind it go down into the soil like a young tree, underacinate and vigorous. I should like to call it poetry, but it is not all that. Writing is sometimes too elemental and half-hewn to be poetry. It is more likely that Miss Kimball narrowly escaped making a volume of prose. But what isn't poetry is very close to it, and the rest—particularly "Mrs. Doane Comes Back"—is the real, turbulent stuff.

Most of the verses are long—long unrhymed iambic pentameters with frequent feminine endings and only slight internal variations. They suffer from that, nearly all of them, and especially the otherwise powerful story called "The Mating-Flight of Stasia Whitsett." One of the prime excellencies of "John Brown's Body," you remember, is the apt and continual breaking of its meter. Miss Kimball's verses need relief. Her method, for all the subtlety of language, is too direct. There is not enough cross-rhythm, or change of pace—and it is odd to be saying of any modern poetry that it fails for lack of mechanics. But I am not talking of such as "Mrs. Doane Comes Back." There is something gigantic about this, and the loping stanzas, like Stasia herself, "spindled up strong to faculty and will." We judge a book by the best that's in it. But even without Mrs. Doane you would find that every other page has

a sniff of April in it,
Of old and set and hard things swift dissolving.

There are curious indications. Miss Kimball has the inventive mind of O. Henry: many short stories are based on less than the least of her verses. But this is not mere cleverness and invention. There

is a certain epic quality, too, that you get in some of Masfield and Sassoon: "The Devil Is a Woman," "The Mating-Flight of Stasia Whitsett," let us say, and "Portrait of an Old Mother." She is speaking most of the time of more than an individual: a region, a county, a countryside. Percy MacKaye, not always a successful writer, I think, did this once in "Dog-Town Common." He made a village live in terms of a handful of people. Miss Kimball has also a pen for dialect, and can use it naturally and effectively as T. F. Powys does, for example, in his short stories. There are familiar traces too. It is not all local. Ardmore, Oklahoma, perhaps, and Adamant, Missouri; but behind this something of the genius of Robinson, and a few Frost-bitten lines that betray New England.

Yet Miss Kimball is still very much alone, and her furrows are often new furrows in a bottom that has just been cleared. I should like to get Mrs. Doane out of this, for it is possible that she is half the book, and her presence renders judgment cloudy. "Be clear, be clear," said Havelock Ellis, "be not too clear." But sometimes Miss Kimball is not clear enough. Her occasional periphrastics and involute thought are a sign that she has not mastered her form. This will come. A poet with something to say will work it out as surely as a Celt's head is full of dreams. Read Mrs. Doane and you will understand.

Alas, Poor Yorick

THE BANKRUPTCY OF MARRIAGE. By V. F. CALVERTON. New York: The Macaulay Company. 1928. \$3.

THE MARRIAGE CRISIS. By ERNEST R. GROVES. New York: Longmans, Green & Co. 1928. \$2.

THE NEW MORALITY. By DURANT DRAKE. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1928. \$2.50.

Reviewed by H. W. KALLEN

IN these three books that fellow of infinite jest, Ye Goode Olde Familye, receives three more or less decent obsequies. None of them is quite at ease over his passing, none indeed, is sure that he is dead and not merely dying; but all signalize the implications of his death, and all have things to say about the modern order and the new morality. Mr. Drake treats of the new morality as a whole, and discusses marriage and the family as one item of many in the modern way of life. Messrs. Groves and Calverton see in marriage and the family the point of crisis in the passage from ancient sin to new salvation or ancient salvation to new sin.

Only Mr. Drake defines the new morality; it is new today because it replaces authority with practical consequences as the basis for conduct. On practical grounds, Messrs. Calverton and Groves would not differ with him. Their argument is that the effects of science and industry and the modern point of view upon sexual behavior are disintegrative, and that the family, which used to be the most stable and enduring of all social institutions, is by way of becoming the most fluid and impermanent one. Mr. Groves thinks that contraception did it, and he doesn't believe that free sex relations or even companionate marriage can replace Ye Goode Olde Familye. He'd like to keep it going, in spite of feminism, delicatessen, and divorce. He says that if favorable conditions were provided for the family to grow in it would flourish. Among them he counts "education for family life," an improved love-life between husband and wife, social freedom, treating divorce "as a piece of maladjustment," painless childbirth, family insurance, decent housing, and adequate interior decoration, personal and parlor. That these tools would fashion anent Ye Goode Olde Familye, seems to me a faith of Mr. Groves. And in these matters works are more requisite than faith.

Mr. Calverton's outlook is less sentimental and more robust. He repeats the situation and refrains from proposing a cure. *Solvitur ambulando* seems to be his hopeful motto.

While in the past (he writes) we have known the cost of opinion, it is the future which will introduce us to the costs of freedom. If freedom as a theory is perfect, and as an aspiration is ideal, it is foolish of us, however, to imagine that in practice it will be accompanied by a complete absence of discord. There will still be individual dilemmas; individual difficulties, and individual disasters, but they will

not be economic and social in character, nor the consequence of moral subjection. . . . Until the new ways have been tried and tested, and the rapids conquered in the crossing, movement in this direction and that will be uncertain and insecure. These are the dangers that accompany exploration. It is the goal which inspires their risks. It is the end which defines their influence and omen.

Amen.

Of the three books, I like Mr. Calverton's best.

The Price of Security

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up with the standard of living, and teachers everywhere are worse off, socially, financially, and in the general respect of the community, than when the Great Complaint began. And beyond this they have done literally nothing to change the basis of their support from a qualified charity to an income paid as well as earned. Loyalty to the profession has kept them at work, the essential excellence of the professional life, even damaged and restricted, has been some compensation, but the intense desire for security of a class made timid by circumstances, has made them impotent.

An honorable, but mistaken, idea has held many good men back who might have been leaders. The concern of the teacher is not money; to act, therefore, with money as an end is repugnant to his nature. Thanks to this nice delicacy, the whole profession suffers. Its life, once so enviable, has been sullied in the eyes of the world by complaints, and even though its hardships, in a new industrial system where professors who teach in our universities are ranked by the economists as below the class which should be able to send their children to these same universities, are almost unbearable, such complaints are only justified if action follows. These reticences and inhibitions of security, this willingness to scrape along by odd jobs of tutoring, editing, summer-school teaching, rather than to try to make the profession pay what it is worth, have resulted in the loss of a great ideal—a good life possible for men of ideas and attractive to the young.

Thus the front line of attack on the countrywide materialism of living is in danger of being wiped out for lack of ammunition. It is fairly safe in its trench, but can neither move forward nor command support. And this will be the deplorable situation until younger men and women, not too enamored of security, break away from the present dependence on charity and show as much courage as plumbers, railway engineers, and domestic servants, with nobler ends in view.

Unless the American intellectualists summon strength to get what they must have for their own mental health, and are willing to risk job and even profession in the attempt, they will become a servant class. And if the men of high ideals who now predominate do not provide leadership, they will be succeeded by a still more timid generation which, when it turns upon its masters, the public will know only how to be mean and shrewd.

The Princeton University Press, which prints in its own shop the books which it publishes, boasts that its organization includes the only Fire Chief in the world who knows how to set Greek type. The fire department of the borough of Princeton, N. J., is a volunteer body and this year has elected as its Chief the foreman of the University Press's composing room, William P. Cox. Mr. Cox has been a member both of the fire department and of the Press's staff for over twenty-five years, and in the course of this quarter century has set, among other things, most of the examination papers for the Greek department of Princeton University.

The Saturday Review of LITERATURE

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Published every week, by The Saturday Review Co., Inc., Henry S. Canby, President; Roy E. Larsen, Vice-President; Noble A. Cathcart, Secretary-Treasurer, 25 West 45th Street, New York. Subscription rates, per year, postpaid: in the U. S. and Mexico, \$3.50; in Canada, \$4; in Great Britain, 18 shillings; elsewhere, \$4.50. All business communications should be addressed to 25 West 45th Street, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 1, 1879. Vol. 5. No. 39.

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