

Round About Parnassus

By WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

I HAVE previously reviewed former work of Elizabeth Hollister Frost in this column, and have, I think, previously commented on the fact that there are now three Frosts at least writing in this country, none, so far as I know, related to the other. Robert Frost is, of course, one of the greatest names in modern American poetry. Frances Frost is a newcomer of high potentiality. Elizabeth Hollister Frost, who came in view a little earlier than the latter, has produced *The Lost Lyrist* and *Hovering Shadow*. Now she gives us *The Closed Gentian* (Harpers). The title is taken from an actual incident, with its aftermath, movingly described in the dedication. Certain of the poems included have previously appeared in four different periodicals. The poems are brief. This verse is characteristic of them:

*I leaned to pick a clematis
And open swung a door
Leading to a dimension
I had not seen before.*

That, of course, suggests Emily Dickinson. "The Dance" and "The Bride Bereaved" suggest Hardy. It is apparent in what to me is probably the best poem in the book, "Circumference" (which recalls to one Genevieve Taggard's anthology of mystical poetry of the same title), that "Emily and Gerard, two whistling daggers," as well as Hardy himself are three of the great admirations of the author. Gerard is, of course, Gerard Manley Hopkins. But by the foregoing remarks I do not mean that Mrs. Frost's work is entirely derivative. That is not at all true. In fact she has a certain quirk of expression quite her own. The tenor of her poetry is search for something beyond the obstinacy of loss. In Part Two she becomes objective for a little, and gives us, among other portraits, one of "Aunt Harriet" which is strongly etched. She conveys sincere emotion in her personal songs. The "Innocent Song" is wholly delightful in its peculiarity, and her warning to youth a vivid cry. She can make beautiful and powerful pictures of intellectual matters: *The murmurous lovers sleep in peaceful amber
Of turning dawn; they need not think, but are.
But look! See Hafiz in the high boughs clamber,
Parrot of the eternal, for a star.*

*Revolving and revolving and revolving,
Dante and Goethe shake the retreating floor,
Besieging and exhorting, then dissolving
Against the ether's closed revolving door.*

While her metaphysical speculation tries as yet a tentative wing, I should not be surprised if it were not in that direction that her greatest strength will come to her. But seldom has a mood of the childless been sung so hauntingly as in "The Bride Bereaved," already mentioned, subtitled "Island Cradle Song." There is a tendency elsewhere sometimes to prettify, sometimes to wax exclamatory with too great ease. But, generally speaking, this small volume is selective and has obviously undergone self-criticism.

K. N. Llewellyn is a new name to me. His *Put in His Thumb* is published by the Century Company. It is pleasingly dedicated "to all fine beasts." The author, in his preface, is apparently as fully aware of the defects of his poems as of their virtues. The work is apparently, according to him, the by-product of one earning his living at law practice. At the very beginning we find, in "Obiter still is Fancy's child," a sagacious reference to this:

*Who hews too close must miss the mark;
truth too much true is dying truth.
Obiter glows in gathering dark,
colors the clouds of doom with youth.*

There is a section of ballades—not very good ballades—dedicated to the law. There is an ingratiating section apparently written by a favorite maltese cat, the best of whose observations is the comment on the stupidity of human beings in always sleeping on top of a bed, and so on, instead of never knowing the "underneath" world of a cat. There are good poems on caged animals and an ironic longer poem called "Economic Incentive" which paints the futility of the present life of business devoid of any spiritual goal, the eyelessness of our present economic system. There is verse concerning the out-of-doors, there is apprehension of the atavistic. The author impresses one as an alive and likable person who refuses to be stifled by economic pressure or made a mere cog in a machine. Of his work he has already said himself that its defects seem to him beside the point, "And running beside the technical defects are at least two technical virtues: a sense for rhythm-value, and distaste for padding." This is true. It is not enough to make the volume poetry save here and there, and occasionally. As I say, a likeable person, a man of gusto, is apparent in the verse. But, though one group of verses is devoted to ponderings on words, true mastery of language is not often apparent. I shall quote "Veil," a short poem not indicative of the author's range, but one of his best in expression and content. It also reveals his technical faults:

*Words shuttle silently and weave.
Names cover things, and men know names alone;
scatter a name, some pseudo-thing is sown—
over and under, over and under—Believe!*

*Words shuttle silently and weave a mind.
Unseen by name, wide worlds, aglow, impassioned.
While we are names our fathers' fathers fashioned—
woven of words, with words for eyes—and blind.*

In *Quatrains for my Daughter*, by Elizabeth Morrow, of which Alfred A. Knopf has, with his usual good taste, made a beautiful book, the best poems are not the quatrains. They are the poems on "Atlas" and "Lot's Wife." Others, too, have life and color. This is a slight book, but it proves Mrs. Morrow a cultivated writer who is at times inclined to see the overlooked aspect of a situation, and that proves her a poet. Without remarkable

accomplishment in general, she can achieve pictorial beauty. She is on the side of youth in its struggle with age. And she achieves to a certain extent precision of phrase.

The sonnets of Mary E. Bulkley in *Speaking at Seventy*, published by Gelber & Lilienthal, Inc., in San Francisco, constitute a phenomenon, in that the author celebrated her seventy-fifth birthday in November, and, prior to this sonnet sequence, had written no poetry. This would be of little moment if the sonnets were worthless, as they are not. They are sufficiently interesting to comment upon. The format and typography of the book are by the Grabhorn Press, the edition a limited one. There are only a dozen of these sonnets. This, the last, seems to us quite remarkable under the circumstances:

*A pine-cone is a plummet which the tree
Points to the earth, wherein its strong roots lie.*

*A retrospect and pregnant prophecy
Of days to come, when boughs shall brush the sky.*

From the cone's tip upcurled the spirals twine

*And widen out in ever-gracious sweep
Of long, far-reaching yet returning line
To catch the great stars in an upward leap.*

*So, looking back to that primeval slime
Whence faint life sprang, I trace a widening curve*

Up to that surge, whose lines in coming time

May reach to splendid planets, and not swerve

To break the lengthening line of life-to-be,

A line which gathers in Eternity.

CREATION of the Vachel Lindsay Testimonial fund was announced recently through the directors of the Abraham Lincoln association in Springfield, Ill., who will take charge of the fund and see to its appropriate disposal.

Contributions may be made to Paul M. Angle, secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Association, 701 First National Bank, Springfield, I

cepted, and t not be disclosed. The direct former Governor Frank O. Lowden, Logan Hay, Pascal E. Hatch, A. D. Mackie, J. Paul Clayton, Henry M. Merriam, Alice E. Bunn, George W. Bunn, Jr., E. D. Keys, H. A. Converse, and R. C. Lanphier.

A statement issued by the directors is as follows:

"Since Vachel Lindsay's sudden death last Saturday a growing realization of the debt this community owes to him has been manifest. Of those who have lived in Springfield during the hundred and ten years of its life, only Abraham Lincoln is more widely known. But Vachel Lindsay did more for this city than add to its fame by the mere fact of his residence. Wherever he went, in Europe as well as the United States, he carried its name and gloried in it. He wrote of it and sang of it until Springfield, Ill., came to be coupled inseparably with his own name. And to his love for the city of his residence he added a faith, a vision, of a greater, finer city which will always be an inspiration to those who live here.

"The Vachel Lindsay Testimonial has been created so that those who wish to show to Mr. Lindsay's family their immediate appreciation of his contribution—which by its very nature never brought the financial reward it merited—can do so. A number of contributions have already been made, and many more have been offered. At the request of a number of those interested, the directors of the Abraham Lincoln association, acting as a representative civic group, have agreed to take charge of the fund and see to its appropriate disposal."

"Among the many new editions of works by and about Goethe," says the *London Observer*, "both editions de luxe and others more suited to the day's financial problems, the most monumental will come not from Weimar, the official centre of the Goethe organizations, but from Mainz, where the printer, Gutenberg, was born. From Mainz is now issued an appeal to the world to help Germany do homage to Goethe's memory. A world, or international, edition of his works is planned, in fifty volumes, whose text has been subjected to the approval of the director of the Goethe archives in Weimar, Professor Wahl.

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Points of View

In Memoriam

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
Sir:

May I bring to the attention of your readers a memorial prepared by a faculty committee of the University of North Carolina after the untimely death, last September, of Edwin Greenlaw, William Osler Professor of English Literature in Johns Hopkins University and formerly

dean of the graduate school at the University of North Carolina? Higher education and scholarship have lost one of America's finest teachers and scholars and a singularly vivid and lovable personality. What he meant to his colleagues and to the culture of the nation has been indicated, in true and moderate terms, by Professor John M. Booker and the other signatories of the memorial, from which I may quote a few paragraphs:

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"Professor Greenlaw's contributions to the nation's effort in the World War were directed with his characteristic ingenuity towards stimulating friendship for our allies through understanding of the French and English contributions to American civilization. His projected Lafayette Society developed no further than a prospectus. But he planned and edited War Extension Bulletins and a college text-book anthology entitled 'The Great Tradition' that attracted considerable attention. These revealed the same qualities that brought his later 'Literature and Life' such wide-spread adoption.

"This latter book he considered his main contribution to the art of teaching. Certainly it shows his penetrating detection of significant relationships and his artistic display of them. In conversation these faculties surprised and delighted with the force of sudden illuminations. In class they combined with informal lecturing, in which the casual manner concealed at first blush the compact thinking, to vary the rigor of his inductive method. This last was his favorite instrument, and in the use of it he was a master. His participation in graduate orals became a part of one's education. But artistry shaped his discipline.

"Enthusiasm for research, unflagging and unfeigned, animated Edwin Greenlaw from his earliest student contacts with acknowledged masters to his most recent direction of his own disciples, and sustained him zealously at work through the ebbing vitality of his last years—still collecting fresh material, still conceiving ambitious projects. He died as he lived—in the Quest. He had no patience with what he called 'intellectual dabbling'; and he regarded as pathological the student or scholar whom he had once diagnosed as afflicted with 'fatal facility.' The student found in him an exacting if exhilarating discipline; the fellow-seekers after truth, a warm response and an imaginative comprehension that moved easily from the library to the laboratory. Every investigator here knew that the mere nature of his effort secured for him in Greenlaw an intelligent, sympathetic, and powerful friend.

"Though more especially attracted as he was by the larger movements and wider trends in human culture as expressed in literature, his faith in sound and established methods roused him to eloquence in the gospel, to recall his own words, of 'the infinitesimally small.' His own productive work included distinctive contributions in the fields of medieval romance, Shakespeare, and Milton. It was, however, his numerous and stimulating studies in the poet Spenser and his circle that chiefly engaged his energies and won for him an international reputation. As only one witness to his standing in this field, may be cited the recognition that conservative English authorities accorded his brilliant exposition of Spenser's 'Mother Hubbard's Tale' in terms of the political, literary, and ecclesiastical conditions at Elizabeth's court. Professor Greenlaw's long application to Spenserian problems came to fullest flower in the conception and planning of a variorum edition of the poet, in which he was the guiding spirit. Not the least ironic touch of Fate upon this scholar was the circumstance that he barely missed taking into his hands the first volume of the Variorum."

NORMAN FOERSTER.

University of Iowa.

William Faulkner

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
Sir:

The reviewing boys are at it again, I see. Now they've got Mr. Faulkner pinned right down. He spends his time in developing a technique. He knows what he wants to say, but he doesn't quite know how to say it. Well, well. And the reviewing boys say that if Mr. Faulkner doesn't pretty soon find out how to say what he wants to say he'll only be a promise.

What a fate for a Faulkner! Good Lord, how long does this kind of thing have to keep up? Faulkner is a promise. A promise of what? He can write, and as a man who can do that, he arrived long, long ago. His prose is as classic as the Parthenon. He never wastes a word. He is clear, crystal clear, so clear in fact, that he becomes difficult to follow. He can only be likened to the blinding brilliance of a superfine mirror. You lose perspective when you look at Faulkner. He knows his world. It may not be yours, or mine, but it is undoubtedly his. Guy Pene du Bois almost caught it in his picture. But the picture

was muddy. Faulkner's Indians, Negroes, demi-reps, ex-anthings, feebs, and college boys are never that. They are clear and sharp like a knife. They move around in his crystal world and the brilliance of their moving blinds us.

Why all this analysis of his war stories? All about rounds, and projections, and points in space and consciousness. Does Mr. Faulkner care? Not the least little bit. You can't separate him out. You can't say, this is "the Faulkner." You can't say, this is good and this is bad. His things are neither. They are Faulkner. And they are all alike. This is the amazing thing about the man. He is the most consistent writer of prose that the current generation knows. He never slips; he never falters. He is always clear, clean, and crystal-like.

Faulkner doesn't like life. He sees it in its more ghastly aspects. He is bitter. To him it is all a fanfare of insanity, of something away from the norm. He doesn't care a sweet rap really to tell anyone about it. He sees it as only he, in all contemporary letters, sees it. And he writes it that way, with a startling clarity, and a bitter and telling brightness. That is his forte, his strength. He has a point of view. And he presents that point of view consistently. He doesn't preach. He doesn't care enough. Whether he makes the Academy—God forbid!—or not, is of no importance at all. He paints his life as he sees it. And he sees it with the unblinking, and uncaring, eye of a microscope. Why, you don't even shudder at him. And that is clarity of vision and presentation for you, if anything ever was.

Why don't these reviewers of American letters read and let their reading go at that? Why do they feel called upon to rationalize a critique of writing for us? Who cares any more? It's all o.k. for college professors and other religious. But for ordinary human beings who read and either like or not like, it is all so much apple-sauce.

Faulkner can write, and is writing, a prose that is searingly clear, and beautifully consistent, as is no other prose in contemporary American letters. When you read Faulkner, you read Faulkner. You get him. You know what he thinks of life and you see it as he does. That is all that matters in any art. And that is what makes him great. It makes him a bigger force than his themes. It makes him the thing that counts. It makes him what Arnold Bennett said, "An American who writes like an angel." William Faulkner, a bitter soul, who lets you know about it.

But the reviewing fraternity must pin him down, and eventually they'll give him a degree, or they won't give him a degree. But they'll always heave a sigh over the promise of what might have been.

Soft music, professor, something like hearts and flowers. It is to laugh!

BERTRAM ENOS.

Autographed Door

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
Sir:

As to the autographed door from Frank Shay's bookshop mentioned recently in the *Bowling Green*: As recently as a year and a half ago, when I left New York for what I hope was not the last time, the door (or at least an autographed door, bearing, as I recall, among other names, Johnnie Held's, Bobbie Edwards's, and Christopher Morley's) was reposing well toward the back of Dacca's shop, on Washington Square South. It may, of course, have been moved elsewhere since, or sold up the river to some millionaire collector; but I give you the clue for what it may be worth.

Omaha, Neb.

W. GAFFNEY.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
Sir:

It is intended to publish, in the near future, a volume of the letters of my uncle, the late *Father Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Many are available, but others are thought to exist in the hands of his various correspondents or their successors. The work of the editor would therefore be made simpler, and the value of the eventual collection be increased, if owners of such letters would be kind enough to lend them to me for the purposes of copying. As is usual in such cases, the letters will be returned under registered covers, and every care will be taken of them while they are out of their owners' hands.

GERARD HOPKINS

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