

## Round about Parnassus

By WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

ONE of the most peculiar poems we have read for sometime is James Whaler's "Green River, A Poem for Rafinesque." You will immediately ask who Rafinesque was. We can assure you we hadn't the slightest idea of ourself before we read Mr. Whaler's poem. We may possibly be ahead of time in our mention of this book, which is published by Harcourt, Brace, as we have read the poem in galleys. Nevertheless it is by all odds the most outstanding poetry that has come under our eye this week, and we feel we should treat of it now.

Constantine Rafinesque, it seems, was a Sicilian-American naturalist who "died in a lonely garret on lower Race Street, Philadelphia. His great fields were botany and ichthyology. Mr. Whaler's long narrative poem fills in his early life through the imagination and takes him in the latter part of the narrative through an exciting if improbable discovery of an entire lost race in a great cave like the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky, where one of the chambers is actually called Rafinesque Hall. There is also a Rafinesque's Cave in Hart County.

The name of the poem, "Green River," is given by the Green River region in Kentucky, where there are still "memorials of Rafinesque wanderings." At the moment we cannot recall another long poem based on the life of a naturalist of genius. It is the kind of life Browning might have put in a narrative, though Browning would have handled the situation between the original wife and husband with more subtlety and less melodrama. Nevertheless, Mr. Whaler has taken full advantage of the dramatic possibilities of the naturalist's meeting with and eventual marriage to the daughter of a Greek innkeeper who was bound to become unfaithful to a husband always absenting himself on scientific exploration. Rafinesque then came to America with his life in ruins. For a quarter of a century he experienced bad luck in this country, finally died, and was buried in the potter's field. His story is told by dialogue and by his own narration in friendly conversation.

"Green River" has much merit. It fulfills to a certain extent the promise of Mr. Whaler's first book. It is mainly in decasyllabic couplets. The phrase and epithet often lack freshness, but the scheme of the poem is highly original and, considering that the subject is mainly merely a curious one, the poet manages to draw on the reader's interest very well. Sometimes the conversation seems stilted, but we are dealing with a man who died in 1840, and Mr. Whaler has endeavored to reproduce the manner of speech of that time.

It is in his crises that Mr. Whaler's imagination, taking fire, deals in an impressionism that quickens the pulse of the poem. The early descriptions of Rafinesque's infatuation with the Greek girl and the struggle between him and his false friend are very good. The detail of a naturalist's life, the Sicilian scene, all the materials in which he has worked out his story, seem to be most familiar to Mr. Whaler. He has done his documenting with verisimilitude. He has drawn a convincing portrait.

There is nothing obscure about the story he tells. We should say that the defect of the poem is merely that of style. Its style seems to be but half-formed. But we welcome a poet who essays long narrative. He has done considerably better with it than the average run.

Fowler Wright, that astonishing Wellsian romancer who gave us "Deluge," is also a poet and a publisher of poetry. Before us are eight small green volumes uniform in size and format, chiefly by women, all containing rather slight lyrical matter. In case you are interested, the address of the publisher is St. George's Hall, Little Russell Street, London, W.C.1. Three of the women poets seem to be Americans. The verse of Isabel Fiske Conant is now well known in this country, and hers is one of the volumes. Then there are "Cape Cod Woman and Other Poems" by Ethel Ericson, and "Homing" by Caroline Hazard. Though the last is an American, her verse, which has charm, is entirely concerned with England. Of these three women we feel that Mrs. Conant, though hers is not often finished verse, is the most original. Her fancy is interesting. The others do rather more obvious things. Mr. Clarence L. Peaslee, the only man represented, also seems to be an American, but we regret to say that his offering in "Tomorrow" is rather inferior to the work of any of the women.

The poems of Claude Collier Abbott, "Ploughed Earth," which he dedicates to Geoffrey Chaucer and which Richard R.

Smith publishes over here, have a certain virtue in their simplicity. Here, for instance, is a short poem in bucolic vernacular that is highly natural:

### SAMSON'S CATCH

*Binder's sleep in barn be ended,  
Sails are set, canvases mended,  
The rusty scythes are whetted and ground,  
Main time it be to start cutting round;  
Lumbor winter oats be shaling,  
Wheat's a picture, barley's failing.  
Master and we in cart lodge shade  
Handselled the bargain for harvest song.  
Patchy and Luke are busy a-brewing  
Beer on the green for we a-stewing.  
There's drink and wittles and work to spare  
Now harvest's here; come up, old mare!*

Mr. Abbott has one most haunting poem about some madhouse inmates watching a cricket match, and poems like "Philip's Song" and "Hounds of Air" are well worth reading. Perhaps "Sheepcotes," for its convincing description, is one of Mr. Abbott's most successful poems:

*Goldfinches glitter round white thistle heads,  
Kestrel and sparrow-hawk swoop to their prey;  
With rasping chatter flees that cunning sold  
The bravely-feathered jay.*

In these poems of the countryside there is a little of the magic that Masefield has brought to his.

Ernest Hartsock is head of The Bozard Press, Box 67, Sta. E., Atlanta, Georgia, and publishes poetry. He is also a poet himself. His most recent book was "Strange Splendor," published last fall, successor to two others, "Romance and Stardust" and "Narcissus and Iscariot." At his best he is very good, original and interesting, as in the poem "Magnet," which we clipped from a magazine some time ago to keep in our scrapbook. A taste of best phrasing may be given in "Crow":

*There is no parson quite so good  
At exegetic platitudes  
As this black vicar of the wood  
Who clears his dry asthmatic throat  
And by ecclesiastic rote  
Harps on his lone eclectic note,  
Part Hamlet, part Polonius,  
A frock-coat full of brass and fuss.  
And though from pulpit in a pine  
He never drops a chance to shine,  
They say who know this solemn bird  
(Like other monks of whom we've heard)  
The sins he feels he must condemn  
He practises by stratagem:  
A transitory hypocrite,  
He robs the cornfield bit by bit,  
And rears very plump by it.*

Mr. Hartsock has made a good start and with a good deal of self-discipline in his verse he may accomplish much.

Henry Harrison, of 27 East 7th Street, is an indefatigable publisher of poetry. There are no less than eight separate volumes before us from his press. The "Selected Poems of Benjamin Musser" are perhaps the most important of these, but why, oh why were they printed on pink paper? Mr. Musser is no amateur at versification, and his observation is often curious and humorous. For all that he remains a minor poet who does not sufficiently impress with any one poem. Of the other books the most interesting is Charles Beghtol's "The Little Blue Flute," written by one who has known and lived with the American Indians. He knows the Hopis. His book consists of a long narrative and some shorter poems, all adaptations of Hopi poetry and ritual. They are genuine. The other books from Mr. Harrison's publishing house that we now must gently lower into the discard are for the most part fairly adequately written but are leagues from being that wild splendor that is real poetry.

The Right Rev. William Francis Barry, scholar theologian and biographer, who died some weeks ago at Oxford, although active in discharging the duties of his parishes, was able to achieve a distinguished position as the chief quarterly writer of his generation. Since 1875 the *Dublin Review* was seldom without an article by him. Between 1889 and 1900 he contributed to every number of the quarterly.

The *Edinburgh* and *Nineteenth Century* quarterlies were also open to him. He may in addition be said to have created the English Catholic novel. His greatest influence was wielded through such philosophical biographies as those he wrote of Newman and Renan.

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## Points of View

### Anonymous Reviewing

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

Your interesting leader, *Reluctant Reviewers*, invites American reviewers to speak out more frankly, but at the same time enumerates some of the considerations which will prevent the timid, peace-loving intellectual from responding to your invitation. Have you not overlooked the chief obstacle to truth-telling in reviews? The editor may welcome a discriminating frankness, the public or the clique of his more ardent admirers will not tolerate anything but unqualified laudation of any writer who has won their favor. A communication in your own columns wittily ridiculed me for having ventured to mention in a review one or two mistranslations in the book of a popular favorite. Another entirely courteous but frank, true, and specific criticism published in another New York weekly was met by a flood of extravagantly laudatory reviews of the same book and condemned in conversation as true but improper. From another review in which I deprecated what seems to a classicist a modern misuse of the word humanism, a lady actually inferred that I would be unwilling to meet socially any of my very good and greatly respected friends, the so-called humanists.

No reviewer who values his peace of mind and who is not resigned to be overwhelmed with abuse instead of reasons will dare to criticize frankly not the persons but even the published writings of Mr. H. G. Wells, Mr. Bernard Shaw, Professor Gilbert Murray, Miss Jane Addams, and Mr. George Santayana, to mention at random a few of the most brilliant illustrations of my thesis. Mr. Santayana will serve as a test case both of your tolerance and that of the lesser but very articulate public of his followers. He is a genuine poet. His prose style is in its way beautiful. But the effect is achieved by the temperate use of pretty but question-begging imagery and by an evasive use of dainty abstractions so equivocal that his admirers cannot define his meaning and a critic cannot hold him responsible for his interpretations of the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history. The tenuity and ambiguity of his thought will surprise any reader who will resolutely undertake to express in plain, unequivocal language the meaning, for instance, of the article on *The Appeal to the Supernatural*. It means, to put it bluntly, that he wishes to eat the cake of idealism and have it too.

There is one other meaning on which even my frankness can only touch lightly. Mr. Santayana was obviously displeased by American life and does not like America. The in its unwarranted extension quite meaningless *cliché*, "the genteel tradition," is itself evidence of that. So is the attribution to those with whom he disagrees of the phrase "that loose, low creature, Walt Whitman."

All reviewers commend the urbanity of Mr. Santayana's style. Do you really think that sneering irony, however delicately expressed, is more urbane than the frank intellectual trenchancy that raises specific issues and presents a definite challenge?

PAUL SHOREY.

Chicago, Ill.

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

Anonymous criticisms? Spare us that, Mr. Editor, please! Even if it means that a few bad books do go unwhipped! We are not so dumb that we can't spot the rotten apples to the extent of letting 'em alone. There's nothing to be gained by shying them up against the barn door.

How do you expect us to use any discrimination of our own (provided we have any, of course) when we don't know any more than anonymity tells us? And it makes a difference (to me at any rate) whether the standards applied to a book were the standards, say, of Sinclair Lewis, or those of Henry Van Dyke. Or of Earnest Elmo Calkins and Stuart Chase.

I am not "clamoring for names and distinctions," but for information, sources, citations, qualifications of witnesses. A "greater frankness of individual opinion" is perhaps desirable, but to my misguided mind at least, opinion under the cloak of anonymity simply ceases to be individual. If it may be "anybody" it might almost as well be nobody.

I may be quite wrong about it, but it seems to me that the *Review* has attained to its enviable position of dignity very largely because it has demonstrated the ability to choose authorities wisely, and to en-

list their interest and coöperation. Perhaps it could have done the same if its contributors had remained anonymous; but I seriously doubt it. I doubt very much if it can maintain its position by a reversal of policy. At least I know one reader to whom its usefulness would be very greatly impaired.

ROY W. JOHNSON.

New Rochelle, N. Y.

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

For my own part, I should dislike very much to have the reviewer's name withheld. If editors were to keep alive the ideal described in the *Saturday Review* editorial of January 10, there would be greater demand for dependable reviews. An occasional editor's dissenting footnote would help, too.

OSCAR L. SIMPSON.

Nashville, Tenn.

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

Apropos of "Reluctant Reviewers," did you ever hear that "the American Historical Association was founded to enable the writers of histories to meet and become acquainted with (and perhaps drink a glass of beer with) the reviewers of histories"? There is a widespread opinion in the Guild that reviews appearing in the *American Historical Review* are too amiable, and that reviews of French and German and English works are more searching than reviews of American books. This for what it is worth. A HISTORIAN.

We quote the following from the *Princeton University Press Almanac* for February:

*The Saturday Review of Literature* in its issue of January 10 complains that "when there is need for frank and honest speaking" on the part of book reviewers, "something restrains them." *The Saturday Review* asks whether anonymity would help this "vice" of book reviewing, and whether that fraction of the American public which reads book reviews would be willing to accept the authority of the journal publishing a review, instead of clamoring for the name and distinctions of the reviewer.

This question is particularly interesting to us, not only because the *Almanac* made a plea for anonymous book reviews some years ago, but because, in answer to our plea, the editor of *The Saturday Review* wrote in to say we were "all wet."

There are dangers of anonymity, of course, but it is to be presumed that reputable Reviews would engage the services of reputable reviewers, and after all an editor has rights which can be exercised whenever he suspects anything is wrong. Further, an editor must, in the last analysis, accept responsibility for the material in his columns, whether it is signed or appears anonymously.

Signed reviews, it seems to us, give the reviewer too great an opportunity to air his own personal opinions. Most books are reviewed by some man interested in the particular field the book covers. That is all right. The trouble is few people are ever entirely agreed about books, and a known reviewer is likely to argue his own position, and in the process neglect the volume he is supposed to be reviewing. If he is reticent, we suspect his reticency may sometimes be due to fear that he is not on particularly safe ground.

Personally, we should much prefer the opinion of *The Saturday Review of Literature* to that of Roscoe Whosis writing in the columns of that excellent periodical. We believe it would carry more weight, just as an unsigned editorial in *The New York Times* carries more weight than a signed expression of opinion from some individual in a neighboring column. We should take it for granted that a good Review would have only good reviewers on its staff. An anonymous book review, sponsored by a reputable Review, would be a responsible review, it seems to us. In our opinion there are too many Pollyannas and Smart Ales writing book reviews nowadays. Practically all of them are straining a bit too hard to appear clever and erudite, and frequently at some other person's expense, the easiest and cheapest method yet devised. We should like to see publishers quoting *The Saturday Review of Literature*, *The New York Times*, *Books*, and *The Atlantic Monthly* in their advertising, rather than,—well, everyone knows their names. Book reviewing, in our humble opinion, is a dignified, honorable, and exceedingly important profession. Sometimes we wonder if, as it is now constituted, it is not in danger of becoming a racket.