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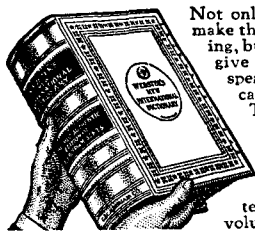
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Round About Parnassus

By WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

ALTHOUGH I did not find in H. A. Overstreet's introduction to Bonaro Wilkinson's *The Poetic Way of Release* (Knopf) anything profound or new, it reminded me of several things that a weekly commentator on contemporary poetry is inclined to forget. One was this statement: "Literary appreciation and criticism have seemed to deal almost exclusively with poetry as a technique of verbal arrangements." While this is not altogether true, it is true that one comes rather to assume that the expression of human thought and feeling through the medium of what we call poetry is one of the most valuable of all means of human expression. The interesting thing about "The Poetic Way of Release" is that it takes for granted that most people do not realize this, as does its "Introduction,"—that most people do not really know what poetry "is all about," though they encounter it and accept it as a part of life, albeit in disguised forms, every day of their existence. They move in rhythms, as Miss Wilkinson very well explains, they speak in metaphor, they perceive—unless they are excessively unobservant—the beauty of expressive language. Miss Wilkinson's book, then, is admittedly a primer for such people, who believe themselves to be uninterested in poetry as a literary medium. "The Poetic Way of Release" does not take for granted an already established interest, as has this department.

Necessarily, to read the book when one's interest has already for sometime been established, is to encounter the obvious restated,—but these things are not obvious to the ordinary layman. And this book for the ordinary layman, I may say at once, ought to prove considerably clarifying and instructive as to the essential function of poetry, as to the distinction between it and prose, as to why the poet elects his particular method of presentation and what he is trying to do with his particular artistic equipment. It says in essence, poetry is not an Eleusinian mystery or the mere toy of esthetes,—poetry is a natural part of life lived richly. It enhances all observation and increases wisdom. It brings a new significance to daily concerns. It turns the memory, from a mere filing-cabinet of facts or cluttered attic of impressions, into a treasury of experiences whose implications are more fully understood; it increases breadth of mind; and, finally, makes life far more interesting than it may have been before. All this is true, and though I have a few reservations to make in regard to Miss Wilkinson's book, I should like to see it read throughout the country because it will serve to open minds to the pleasure and refreshment inherent in an art that has always seemed to me to possess the greatest resources of any art. For in poetry reside the essential communications also of the arts of painting, of music, of sculpture.

In her Chapter Six, "Venturing into Poetry," Miss Wilkinson has done, albeit in an elementary way, something that should be most enlightening to the layman,—she shows us the poet at work, struggling with his material, substituting this word for that, shifting this or that phrase; in short, actually working at his trade. It is not of particular moment just how I should rate the "poem" she evolves, the important thing is that she drives home the point, by practical demonstration, that the poet is not a mere medium who goes into a trance and is inspired to exact expression on the instant. The writing of poetry is just as hard work as is the doing of a thoroughly good job in any other calling. One's gift for it may originally be great and one's skill grows with practice,—but then one may be born with a remarkable mechanical gift or a positive genius for cooking. Aside from this, one learns the possibilities and limitations of the medium one has elected to work in, and can only realize one's highest possibilities by hard labor, though the result must leave no traces of it.

In her chapter "Poetry that is Passing," Miss Wilkinson discusses with intelligence some of the old poetic attitudes; in regard, for instance, to "infant perfection and passive virtue." But when she is speaking of the "brooding satisfaction" the older poets found "in making

studious analyses of every aspect of personal sadness," a taint of the brisk modern world (which we have lately found to be organized with anything but the efficiency we had been taught to believe) creeps in, so that she can actually find mere "neurotic unrestraint" in Shelley's deeply sincere lines ending with that magnificent one, "To me that cup has been dealt in another measure." And what are we to say, when on page 276 she makes the flat statement that "There is no beauty in an old woman who refuses to accept age as a part of experience, nor in a laborer who is not master of his work," except that considerable beauty may nevertheless reside in these, and that the statement is nonsense. I also became suspicious over her introduction of certain particular poems to illustrate certain points she makes, notably when Edgar Guest says a few words in verse in order that she may show that "the idealization of childhood at the expense of mature experience has not completely disappeared"; for earlier it was Wordsworth who so idealized childhood, among others who were considerable poets,—and even the later Whittier could stand nearer to Wordsworth than can the author of "A Heap o' Livin'!" It is not that she does not know Guest's value, or rather the lack of it, but that the reference in this case is careless, as is her citing the beginning of Matthew Arnold's "Philomela" to illustrate "excessive emotionalism," as in her leaving the reader with the impression that Siegfried Sassoon, of all people, merely found in the World War "something ideal,"—for the layman will not have read his other poems,—as in her unconsciously misleading excerpts from T. S. Eliot, and an excerpt from Amy Lowell on page 194 that naturally looks like a very queer phenomenon without its context. On the other hand, in "The Poet and His Fellows" Miss Wilkinson has some good things to say about propaganda and moral platitudes:

The conspicuous thing about all such ready simplifications is that it recommends approaches which in no way resolve the central issues in situations. Thus:

When times are bad an' folks are sad
An' gloomy day by day,
Just try your best at lookin' glad
An' whistle 'em away.

One feels, somehow, not only that the confirmed whistler would make a prodigious nuisance of himself, but that he might be better employed in trying to find out why "times are bad an' folks are sad" and doing something about it.

In general we can recommend the book to the person who says, with perhaps too great an undervaluation of his own powers, "No, I just can't read poetry, I don't know what it's all about!" for Miss Wilkinson's elucidations are simple and clear. She is voluminous in quotation to illustrate, and while she does not delve very deep into modern tendencies, she prepares the ground for the average reader to do his own harvesting.

Farrar & Rinehart bring out *Jasbo Brown and Selected Poems*, by DuBose Heyward, now well-known as the writer of "Porgy," and the dramatist of it and of "Brass Ankle." The title poem treats of the negro who is supposed, according to tradition, to have given us the modern term "jazz." The poems selected from Mr. Heyward's former book, "Skylines and Horizons," impress for the most part with their grave power. Perhaps the most moving is the "Chant for an Old Town," which presents the glamour of the past in the face of "modern improvements." The poems "written in the shadow of the Great Smokies," include the much-quoted "A Yoke of Steers," the haunting one entitled "The Girl," and the colloquial "Black Christmas." Those written in the South Carolina Low Country give us, among others, the striking "Buzzard Island." "Other Poems," the last section, contains a beautiful "Elegy," and ends with a fine "Epitaph for a Poet."

Mr. Heyward's entire poetic output is not great, but one feels that he has never compromised with his art. He has ploughed his own furrow. His subjects chose him. If his work is seldom astonishing, it is written with a fine sincerity and a pondered love of language.

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Southern Writer's in Congress

THE University of Virginia was host recently to a house-party of Southern authors that might well serve as a model for other such convocations. A true copy could, of course, be made almost nowhere except at Mr. Jefferson's university where the art of being an easy and delightful host, although not useful for credits toward a degree, is understood and practiced with the utmost spontaneity. The university—which in this particular connection may be understood to mean its Poe Professor, Dr. James Southall Wilson, and Mr. Stringfellow Barr, who is both a professor and the editor of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*—had arranged a program consisting of two or three informal formal discussions and some lunch and dinner-parties; and they began by assuring the arrivals that they need not attend any of them. So of course everybody went to everything. No resolutions nor pronouncements were made, and what the Southern writer thinks of Romanticism or the Time-spirit will have to be discovered by other means. There were no appointed leaders, yet the talk led through the mazy and dangerous stream of ideas with a result that was not serious nor yet frivolous but something between, or rather, around the two, for both were included.

The most conspicuous thing about the writers was their lack of self-consciousness. They were all being themselves—something admittedly rare in an artistic gathering; and it was also worthy of remark that they availed themselves of the abundant hospitality of the Charlottesville people only so far as it unfroze the genial current of the soul and not to the point where it made merely another wild party.

It was an exciting experience to look round the room at the opening discussion in Madison Hall and see the Southern writers in congress assembled. Southern languor must be out of date in 1931, for it was undiscoverable in the clang of literary argument. Behind an evident type of physiognomy there was an equally evident individuality bred, perhaps, by the isolation in which most of the writers live scattered about the Southern states. That many of them find this isolation, valuable though it doubtless is, a trifle excessive was obvious from the eagerness with which they rubbed shoulders and theories—theories which were first tossed out in impromptu remarks at Madison Hall, and were snatched up, worried, torn, and revamped between times all over the neighboring countryside. Discussion was set in motion by Ellen Glasgow who can be both pithy and witty in speech as few others can. The organizing committee's one essay at formality had been the suggestion of "The Southern Writer and his Public" as a subject for general consideration. This subject Miss Glasgow threw into the scrap-basket in her opening sentence where it lay without being referred to again throughout the two days of the conference. Instead she made provocative remarks about historical and fictional truth as distinguished from real truth, at which the historians, jealous for their Muse, sprang to the breach, led by Ulrich B. Phillips and Archibald Henderson. Some closing remarks of Dr. Henderson's about dreams opened up a somewhat mystic vein which was followed by Mary Johnston who spoke at length of the obligations of the spirit to carry on the poetical tradition of the remote past; Paul

Green's flexible imagination reflected this contemplative attitude as he talked about the loneliness of the creative life, but his assumption that the Machine Age would do no harm to the creative mind drew fire from that doughty agrarian, Donald Davidson, who, with Allen Tate, had come from Tennessee to take his stand against the wheels and crank-shafts. Sherwood Anderson, quite undisturbed about letters at any point of the compass, prowled about claiming to be Southern by virtue of a dash of Italian blood rather than by the choice of Virginia for a home. John Peale Bishop, representing the Southern writer living abroad, discoursed on the advantages of sticking to the native brier-patch. Struthers Burt positively declined to take literature seriously and clamored for his lunch; he was at his best at the table where he kept the talk fizzing. Mr. Cabell maintained his position of sage by keeping silent in his inimitable way.

It was suggested by Emily Clark, Stringfellow Barr and others with editorial experience that a search be instituted for the Southern reader, the writers being in excess in that section at the moment. And many other matters of grave import were discussed not lightly to be given to the public interview. There was some talk of seceding from the Union again, but nothing came of it.

A number of well-known names on the list went in pairs. Besides Struthers and Katherine Newlin Burt there were Cale Young Rice and Alice Hegan Rice, the Maristan Chapmans—yes, there are two, Mr. and Mrs., both of whom apparently write the novels—Allen Tate and his wife, who under her own name of Caroline Gordon has just published a novel, Dorothy and DuBose Heyward, the latter dividing with Ellen Glasgow the position of unofficial chairman at this most unofficial convocation. Lawrence Stallings being unable at the last minute to come, Mrs. Stallings, who was there in her own right as a poet, represented both.

Other conspicuous novelists present were Isa Glenn, James Boyd and, spasmodically, William Faulkner, the latter of considerable interest to all as an important if elusive light on the Mississippian horizon. Irita Van Doren, who once came from Florida, appeared for a day, said nothing, took in everything, and went back to New York with it. Then there were Katherine Anthony, Herschel Brickell, Harrison Smith, William E. Dodd, Lawrence Lee, Andrew Nelson Lytle.

Three sessions altogether were held in Madison Hall but it was between these that the impassioned argument went on—at the *Virginia Quarterly Review* luncheon at the Wilson's house on the West Lawn of the university; in the high hall, designed by Jefferson, of the Farmington Country Club; at Monticello; at the Garrard Glenns' delightful party—Mr. Glenn, besides being the brother of Isa Glenn, will be remembered as the lawyer who defended the "Jurgen" case for Mr. Cabell; at the Colonnade Club tea; at the home of Agnes Rothery Platt, who, as a Charlottesville writer, was hostess to as many as dropped in at her house. Even at Castle Hill, whither the writers went at the invitation of Amelie Rives and her husband, Prince Troubetzkoy, their cuckoo and jug-jug disturbed the celebrated boxwood walks of that truly enchanting place.

And what good came of it at last? The little Peterkins will be asking. To such a question the only possible answer is—perhaps . . . Perhaps if all writers could have the same chance to air their problems and pleasure themselves so spontaneously, life as described in books might not be such a grim business. Certainly this group is eager to repeat the experiment if another university can be found with so generous a spirit as the University of Virginia. For this institution got nothing from the conference except the hotel bills. It safeguarded the privacy of the writers, not asking that they sing for their supper nor perform in any way. It was content with whatever the talent assembled might make of the opportunity it gave.

JOSEPHINE PINCKNEY.

The Porpoise Press of London is about to bring out "The Brave Days," by Neil Munro. Not a strict autobiography of the romantic novelist of Highland life, it contains a full and coherent selection of those "Random Reminiscences" which, under the pen-name of "Mr. Incognito," he contributed during the last few years of his life to the *Glasgow Daily Record and Mail*.

Industrial France

NOUVEAUX STANDARDS. By H. DUBREUIL. Paris: Grasset. 1931.

Reviewed by HELEN HILL

THE extent of interest aroused by M. Dubreuil's first book, "Standards," which after an outstanding success in France was translated into practically all of the Western European languages and appeared in America under the title "Robots or Men," has led him to amplify his theory of industrial society in a form more general than the account of his experiences in American plants which constituted the earlier work.

Since the publication of his first book, M. Dubreuil has been continually invited to lecture or debate before societies of engineers and industrialists, and "Nouveaux Standards" gives a résumé of the point of view he has presented on those occasions, in which he translates into direct recommendations for French practice the observations he previously brought forward as notes on his American experience.

These two books, and especially the latter one, represent as graphically as could be done the anomaly in which Western capitalism finds itself. M. Dubreuil is the Secretary-General of the French Confederation of Labor, which is affiliated with the Socialist Amsterdam International; he is a machinist by trade, and got his American experience in American machine shops. Nevertheless it is he who has been campaigning for the introduction of modern methods of coördination into the factories of France. He represents the France which the idyllic writer on the skill and craftsmanship of the Old World ignores. It is clear to him that among French *spécialités de la maison* are also railroads, electric plants, steel factories, and mines, where the absence of the machine is synonymous not with individuality but with sheer physical toil, and that the choice is not a choice between the self-expression of an artist in a métier and mechanization, but between working with the improvements which the twentieth century has made upon the industrialism of the nineteenth, and working without them. He sees this difference not only as a difference in physical benefits, but as a difference in social structure, for he holds that insofar as the science of human relations is developed and applied, the habit of running a factory on a discipline borrowed at one remove from the barracks will be dropped in favor of a system of coördinated effort. He sees the socialistic apprenticeship in these terms; he is quite realistic about what would happen if the workers were suddenly to attempt to operate an industrial plant much of whose structure lies beyond their experience. Rather than an impotent seat on a committee of direction, he prefers direct responsibility for that part of the plant in which the worker is at home, responsibility for the improvement of the machines with which he works, and for the organization of the work as it passes his machine.

"Nouveaux Standards," like its predecessor, gives a curious double impression. The first impression of an American who reads it and knows something of the mockery, as far as the worker is concerned, of many of the applications of the Taylor system in America, is that M. Dubreuil has taken seriously rather too much of the happiness hooey that personnel departments are accustomed to exude. But that impression is superficial. As M. Dubreuil is careful to explain to anyone who goes to his office in Paris to question him, the "côte ombre" of American industry is not his concern. What he has been looking for is a principle for the reorganization of French industry, and in the light of such a search it is not American failures and hypocrisies but American ideas that may be of value. The books then appear in a different light; as a study in evolutionary revolution, they are interesting.

A conference of writers has just been held in Des Moines, Iowa. It attracted a number of critics and authors from different parts of the country. Lively discussions took place on subjects of interest to those concerned with literature. Mr. Harry Hansen will write on them in next week's *SATURDAY REVIEW*. He has been at the conference and since he has had personal contact with many of those present, he should have much of interest to say.

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