

## Round About Parnassus

By WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

IN "Jane Matthew and Other Poems" (Brewer, Warren & Putnam), Eda Lou Walton has produced a volume of distinguished verse. She possesses a peculiarly sensitive feeling for language, has an innate sense of rhythm, commands solemn chant and impulsive lyrical flight seemingly with ease. This is the true singing voice. In her two long narratives she displays unusual ability in the dissection of psychoses. She deals with especial and strange instances. Her work is entirely barren of humor. It is intensely grave.

The general impression left with me upon finishing reading this book was as if I had been listening to the figure in Dürer's "Melancholia" suddenly become articulate. Lives tortured by the flesh, lives shadowed by vast mountains, lives running to waste in barren sand and yet enamoured of the high bleak crag and the "desolate land." "With mind from body more than half estranged," as she says in one of her shorter poems, "Written in Sand"; with an artistic detachment and integrity of purpose that one must admire; with a more fiery recognition of a younger, ecstatic world sunk like the sun behind ranges of darkening barren rock—but this last only occasionally; she seems to me to dwell upon the sterility of human love to an almost agonizing extent. She emphasizes its unusual aspects, rooted in strange childhoods apart from the normal (if there be indeed any norm!) life of the world.

But no one can deny the power of her writing nor the fluid impressiveness of her versification. First reading her poems in manuscript I find that I have, for a long time before her book appeared, remembered vividly her description of Margaret dancing at the Indian ceremony in New Mexico, as she relates it in "The Blue Room," nor had I forgotten the figure of Margaret's father, that dark brooding vulture of possessiveness. He somewhat recalls, of course, the figure of

Elizabeth Barrett's father as recently presented to us upon the stage, not in the outward circumstances of his life but in essential temperament. The story of Margaret is the story of a daughter left alone to the love of a father, after the death of a mother who was to him as light and joy are to darkness and despair. The possessive love of the father comes so perilously near to incest that the daughter makes her escape—he has, in the meantime, driven away her lover—and can never remake her life again. She dies frustrate. Frustrate also—a frustration of her own strange making—is Jane Matthew, who is haunted and undone by the unfortunate mating of a weakly, religious, and submissive mother to a fiercely lustful father. These two studies, though clothed in the language that is literature, and dealing with highly intellectual people, might almost have grown from the case-histories of Stekel. Because as a child Jane Matthew realized her father's constant mastering of her mother against her will, she subconsciously developed a desire for compensating mastery over the man she loved. She must be independent of marriage. Her previous love experiences before she met Dale ended in final deeply-rooted antagonisms. She is a tortured person, craving the natural life of a woman but obsessed by the fears taught her in childhood by the example of her parents. Dale, in turn, she tortures exquisitely. The pathos is that she gives herself to love for a space and tries to find contentment in it, but the other influences in her nature become too strong for her. Her child is stillborn. Dale naturally falls in love with the young, golden Kathlyn whom Jane had once tended as a mother. Jane has got Kathlyn to come to them, and Jane again triumphs in her very gesture of finally releasing Dale to his new love. She has never allowed him the simple and essentially unimportant marriage rite he desired. Driven in upon herself in adolescence, she has become,



EDA LOU WALTON

against her better impulses, a contorted egotist. Margaret, of "The Blue Room," is a more sympathetic character, though Jane attains a certain grim grandeur. But this brief survey does not take into consideration the subtle analysis Miss Walton has brought to bear upon the character of Jane. One may argue that her character is in some aspects so repellent, and almost ludicrously so, that what is the use of reading about her? But in my own view one cannot quarrel with the choice of an artist's material, only with the use made of it. Jane is, to me, a perfectly possible woman, if not a probable one. Dale is a mere man. The maternal in women adds an element to their love which no man can altogether face with equanimity. A man's love for a woman may be intensely self-sacrificing, but it does not work in the same way. All Jane has to give Dale finally is really this thwarted and wried maternal love. In its shadow he becomes confused and weak. In normal lives, though the maternal element in the love of women operates to an extent that sometimes alarms the more forthright male, it is controlled by a healthy acceptance of life by his mate. The above is, however, only part of what

Miss Walton implies. What she mainly dwells on in all of her poems is the essential loneliness of the intellectually awakened feminine spirit. Which is, of course, equally true of men. What she is interested in as a poet is the possession of the soul by a quest above human concerns.

*For she who slept with mountains is not one  
To find her rest  
Breast to a lover's breast.*

In the poem entitled "Leda, the Lost," she turns the other side of the shield and shows the tragedy to a woman of possession by a dream:

*Dark Leda stripped all naked by one blast,  
Whom love would no more nest in than a tree  
Uprooted from the earth within a vast  
Whirling of blossoms, desired desolately  
Only the love from which she was struck free.*

Miss Walton's "Modern Love" is a good sequence. But it only serves to reaffirm, *With little love, with less assurance given:  
We seek each other's arms, and find therein  
Some stern renewal; this our little haven  
Is but a glimpse; thus strengthened we shall win  
Only another darkness circumscribed  
By burning isolation.*

Such an attitude is understandable in an intellectual woman. It is not the love sought by the average man. Therein resides the whole tragedy of Jane Matthew and Dale. Perhaps I have said enough to indicate the food for thought that is in Miss Walton's volume. As to her technical ability, she can sometimes knit her phrase arrestingly, evince a truly meticulous choice of words; again, at her worst, she weaves rather vain rhetoric. But there is not much of that worst. She has chosen for this book, from many short poems, ones that are certainly interesting. As a minor consideration one regrets a few misprints in the title-poem: "Atlanta," for "Atalanta," "pallet," for "palette," and Kathlyn's retreating "precipitously" rather than "precipitately."



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# The Iowa Writers' Conference

By HARRY HANSEN

**M**R. Norman Foerster's first Conference on Creative Writing at the University of Iowa took place on October 29, 30, and 31, a week after that brilliant assemblage of Southern writers met at the University of Virginia. By a coincidence men who had played an important part in education in the south dominated the Iowa meeting, thereby removing any possible suspicion that it might be devoted to the exploitation of regionalism. As a matter of fact the Conference had little enough in common with what became known over ten years ago as the Middle Western school, which was made up almost entirely of writers whom Professor Irving Babbitt would classify as adherents of the Rousseau heresy.

Mr. Foerster's views on the needs of the creative artist are well known; as a student under Professor Babbitt he comes to Iowa from Harvard by way of the University of North Carolina. Now director of the School of Letters at Iowa, he may be expected to place a heavier weight for tradition and discipline into the scales than did John T. Frederick, whose Midland permitted the writer a wide latitude. Mr. Foerster is no less hospitable to promise and ambition, but he is much more likely to insist on intensive study of masterpieces and a knowledge of comparative literature; it may be noted that in proposing certain objectives for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the field of creative writing he puts proficiency in technique first and possession of creative energy second as desirable qualities in a candidate.

The Conference profited by the presence of the Conference of English Teachers, which cooperated with Mr. Foerster's meetings. This crowded the stately rooms of the Old Capitol, a lovely building, which, by the dignified lines of its portico and the formal character of its doors and windows, reminds one how far the Greek revival of one hundred years ago extended its influence. Halls that once resounded with the angry debate of territorial legislators—farmers in hobnailed boots who, no doubt, emphasized their arguments with inkwells and chairs—now echoed with talk of imaginative writing, freedom of expression, tradition and experiment, technique and liberation—phrases always heard at a conference, although not necessarily allied with creative writing.

Whatever Mr. Foerster's leanings, he made no attempt to pack the meeting with sympathizers. His speakers were, for the most part, far from the humanist camp. Dean Addison Hibbard of Northwestern University, once of the South, could no doubt qualify; Professor Edwin Ford Piper of the University of Iowa likewise presented the scholarly ideal, but "Barbed Wire and Wayfarers" often acknowledges no rhythms save those of the wind as it sweeps over fields of grain. Zona Gale, who gave the opening lecture, had been known to approve that spade-work in American writing which uncovered the ugliness of life on American soil, even though she now yearned for beauty amid the commonplace. But Floyd Dell and Ruth Suckow were, I am afraid, of another confession, and Gerald W. Johnson, for all his association with the school of journalism at the University of North Carolina, brought into the program the breeziness of the editorial offices of the Baltimore *Sun*. We had Gorham B. Munson for a balance wheel, but he was not anxious to be classified.

The rift between the American author of today and the university was on Mr. Foerster's mind; he deplored it especially when he announced his hopes for a course which should give the creative writer the tools of literature without stifling his initiative. The conventional course in composition, a part of freshman English, was unsuitable. Authors who have never entered the portals of a university now dominate American letters. Mr. Foerster spoke of the lesson of the past—Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Landor, Tennyson, Arnold, Morris, Swinburne were university men; in America, Bryant, Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, Lowell, James, and many others received a university education, some of them even taught. To unite writers once more with the university, Mr. Foerster proposed a school of writing which should give writers complete freedom from regimentation, while

placing the legacies of the ages at their disposal.

Young writers, he said, should meet where, when, as long, and as often as they wished, carrying on at the same time a course in the history of the fine arts or some creative work, such as freehand drawing. They would learn the best in literature and for cultural purposes study history, philosophy, or religion, read foreign masterpieces. They might later discover themselves better fitted for teaching than writing, but if they wished to continue studying while writing, the university should provide room for them in its graduate school. For the A.M. degree Mr. Foerster proposed a seminar, a sort of literary club presided over by a sympathetic professor, with a general examination on literature at the end of the term. For the Ph.D. degree he also asked an examination on traditional literature, culture, technique, and criticism.

"His dissertation," continued Mr. Foerster, "should be a piece of imaginative writing, a play, or novel, or poem, published under reputable auspices. The only requirements of this culminating piece of imaginative writing are, first, that it illustrates the writer's proficiency in technique, his ability to discover and control a mode of expression suited to what he has to say; and, secondly, that it illustrates the writer's possession of creative energy, the sort of energy that distinguishes the really promising young author, who writes with a certain authority and seems to promise continuous growth. So much we have a right to ask of candidates for our highest degree. But we have no right to go on to prescribe the direction to be taken by the writer's energy, the view of life for which he is seeking to find a fit vehicle, the particularism to which he consciously or unconsciously adheres. He must be free to find himself, or to hang himself. At most we can demand only a certain unity of vision, a certain inner clearness as to his purpose."

Mr. Foerster added that a school of letters can hardly produce many authors, "but assuredly it can produce better teachers than our young writers sit under today." He said that the plan has already been carried into effect in the University of Iowa.

Irving B. Richman, Iowa historian, spoke on behalf of the subjective interpretation of history; William L. Sowers, assistant professor of English, who has been active in the production of original plays, and Frank Luther Mott, director of the School of Journalism and author of "A History of American Magazines," presided at the sessions. The discussion was enlivened by the vigorous presentation of a psychoanalytical theory of writing by Floyd Dell, who was eagerly listened to. Mr. Dell later elucidated in his lecture the conviction that all writing was the expression of an inner urge which could not be channelled by education and which lost its validity the moment it was subjected to such programs as were proposed by universities. This heretical pronouncement, delivered with all the intensity of which Mr. Dell was capable, was made without reservations of any kind, the effect of it being to make conferences such as this and even universities completely negligible from the standpoint of creative writing. Although the applause was enthusiastic, Mr. Dell did not divert the main business of the proceeding, which, after all, was a recognition of the need of discipline and study by the artist who wished his growth to be "that of a tree, not a cloud." Mr. Gorham Munson sat unmoved, Mr. Edwin Ford Piper remained smiling, Mr. Foerster was unperturbed. Later someone sought a definition of creative writing and failed to get it, even though Harlan Hatcher, who had done his share of it in "Tunnel Hill," had come from Ohio State University to attend the meeting and was present in the audience. But although this term failed of precise definition, the Conference was definitely successful; it brought together men and women of different views, posed a problem, stimulated wide interest, and turned the thoughts of teachers to the importance of preserving and developing originality amid the routine of education.

Harry Hansen, literary Editor of the New York "World Telegram," was born at Davenport, Iowa, and in attending the Iowa conference was returning to familiar ground.

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