

The PHOENIX NEST

By WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

ROUND ABOUT PARNASSUS

DOUBLEDAY, DORAN has brought out in a particularly nice-looking volume "The Poems of Richard Aldington." Since the War Mr. Aldington has developed into one of our most valuable ironic novelists. His poetry has been more or less forgotten. A longer poem of such beauty as "A Dream in the Luxembourg," of 1930, reminds us, however, that his poetic faculties have not failed. I remember the author giving me a copy of this poem in Paris some three years ago, and my interest in the fact that, after all sorts of disaster and disillusionment connected with the War, this love poem seemed to speak with remarkable freshness and ardor. In fact, contrast it with one of Aldington's best earlier poems, "Childhood"—one of the longest of that pre-War period—and how almost unbearably bitter appears the earlier work. No, Aldington lost much during the War; the impress of those experiences cannot well be overemphasized; but after the War he found a new release of energy such as has come to few who have passed through the flame. And he found a person—perhaps that is part of the secret.

This is a large book. It is a complete collection of Mr. Aldington's poems, and many of these have not been published in America. A few have never before appeared in a book. Mr. Aldington furnishes an interesting brief introduction for the volume. It is twenty years since the first three poems in the book were published in Chicago, in Miss Monroe's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*.

Men and women are not distinguished from one another only by the quality of mind, but also by the quality of their feelings and the quality of their senses. And all these qualities must be present in poetry, though I don't for a moment believe there is any fixed or ideal ratio.

So Mr. Aldington in his introduction—a full-blooded definition of poetry with which I am very much in agreement. The extremely modern poetry seems to me to be too completely an intellectual affair. It was not so, just before the War. Poetry was then written by young men who felt intensely both the beauty of the world and its horror. And they expressed themselves explicitly and forcefully. It was perfectly easy to understand them. And with all their faults they possessed an exuberance that seemed the sign of a great age being renewed, of an Elizabethan second coming. Which was not to be.

EARLY AN IMAGIST

The imagism of that time certainly did not eschew vivid sense impressions and a considerable liveliness. Witness the late Miss Lowell, witness the exciting quality of John Gould Fletcher's first "Irradiations," witness Richard Aldington's well-known, "The Faun Sees the Snow for the First Time":

Zeus,
Are the halls of heaven broken up
That you flake down upon me
Feather-strips of marble?
Dis and Styx!
When I stamp my hoof
The frozen-cloud-specks jam into the cleft
So that I reel upon two slippery points. . .
Fool, to stand here cursing
When I might be running!

Much of Mr. Aldington's work is fluidly elusive. But again, as in "Rhapsody in a Third-Class Carriage," he can be as stricken by the ugliness of things as the most unsparing realist:

Deadness of English winter, dreariness,
cold sky over provincial towns, mist.
Melancholy of undulating trams
solitary jangling through muddy streets,
narrowness, imperfection, dullness,
black extinguisher over English towns;
mediocre women in dull clothes—
their nudity a disaster—
heavy cunning men (guts and passbooks),
relics of gentry, workmen on bicycles,
puffy small whores, baby carriages,
shops, newspapers, bets, cinemas, allotments. . .

So, he seems to say, it is better to muse upon the white fingers of Mænads, it is better to make a phantasmagoria like "A Fool in the Forest," and transport a split personality to Greece, it is better even to

translate romance poems or the imaginary voyages of Cyrano de Bergerac and the letters of Voltaire and Frederick the Great. Partly tough-minded modern, partly renaissance dreamer, Richard Aldington is both among the best poets of his time, and yet—somehow—more remote. It is possible indeed, that he may be remembered more for his novels than for his poetry. But the accent of his verse is that of the born artist, and will always delight lovers of the beauty of the word.

OLD BABYLONIA

Gilgamesh was a king in ancient Babylon; and now one of the world's oldest epics, which concerns him, has been translated by William Ellery Leonard into English verse. The book is called "Gilgamesh" and is published by the Viking Press. Mr. Leonard is, of course, famous for the novel in sonnets entitled "Two Lives" and for various volumes of shorter poems. He who originally wrote of Gilgamesh was an unknown poet who set forth his work in cuneiform script on twelve large clay tablets. A photograph of one of these is used as a frontispiece to the book. All the fragments of the tablets are now in the British Museum.

It is interesting that, in this poem, a thousand years before the writing of Genesis, the Semitic folk-tales of the flood and the tree of life and the evil serpent were set down. William Ellery Leonard's rendering of the original, in free rhythms, is based upon the German version of Dr. Hermann Ranke.

What the tablets yield is the story of a mighty ruler in Uruk, for contest with whom the great goddess, Aruru, fashioned another like him, one Engidu. Upon this man's being sent to earth, one of the sacred prostitutes of the temple of Astarte was made the instrument of his initiation into human life. He meets Gilgamesh and they become friends, and both go to destroy the monster Khumbaba in the sacred cedar-forest. Next, after Gilgamesh has excited the wrath of Astarte and she has sent against them a bull-of-heaven, they destroy the bull. Then sickness seizes Engidu. He dies; and Gilgamesh mourns him six days and six nights. Gilgamesh then goes to the mountain Mashu at the earth's end. He passes its guardians, the scorpion-men, and finally, after a dark journey, comes to a grove of the gods. There he finds Siduri, the divine cup-bearer. Her, and later Ur-Shanabi, Gilgamesh questions as to Life and Death. He and Ur-Shanabi sail to find Utnapishtim, the "far-one." The greater part of Utnapishtim's reply to Gilgamesh's questioning—like other sections of the narrative—is lost. From what remains we can only piece out a rather ambiguous answer to Gilgamesh's inquiries concerning death. But Utnapishtim's description of the Flood is very good. Finally Gilgamesh journeys back to "ramparted Uruk" with "Ur-Shanabi the shipman," and eventually talks with the spirit of his friend Engidu conjured from the depths of the earth.

This is a curious ancient legend—incomplete but well worth preserving, and Mr. Leonard has rendered it in a truly poetic fashion, with the scholarship for which he has always been notable.

DE RÉGNIER

Bruce Humphries, Inc., of Boston, publishes *Flora Brent Hamilton's* translations of poems from "La Sandale Ailée" of Henri de Régnier. When I was speaking of Mr. Aldington above, and incidentally mentioned Amy Lowell, it should have reminded me that Amy wrote one of the first articles on de Régnier that I ever read. It was included in her "Six French Poets." De Régnier is one of the greatest of the Symboliste poets. He has approved of Mrs. Hamilton's translations. With Gallic gallantry, he remarks: "Beneath the English verse, I find again the French verse in its sense and in its sonority, as though its splendor confronted me in a mirror." Just the same, I hold it pretty impossible to transpose the delicacies of the French language into our more barbarous tongue, and certainly in poetry the task is an almost insuperable one. I should say that Mrs. Hamilton has succeeded in giving us a notion as to the content and form of M. de Régnier's "The Winged Sandal"; but that only.



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