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The PHOENIX NEST

CONTEMPORARY POETRY: BY WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

ROBINSON JEFFERS has proven the power of his pinions. I am glad to have a new book of his, "Solstice and Other Poems" published by Random House (who do such beautiful books) in such fine large type. I am glad to hear that the first trade edition of 2500 copies was sold out before publication on October first and that the special edition of three hundred copies was oversubscribed. For Jeffers is always worth reading, and no one can now deny him stature.

"Solstice" begins with a dramatic poem hewn out of the closing chapters of the Niblung Saga, a poem which, for dramatic effect, it seems to me should have stopped at the end of part IX, though the ghostly remainder has a certain interest. As to the next and title poem, Jeffers stoops upon this material like his own "Cruel Falcon," whom he conceives Man's soul as envying in the short lyric bridging the two works. For "Solstice" deals with a strange mother's murder of her young children; and although Jeffers is always trying to explain such violent acts to us with a sort of underhum of symbolism, I can see little in the woman but egomania and sadism, nor, if she "had too much energy to die," care particularly that she is one with

a fierce unsubdued core
[That] Lives in the high rock in the heart
of the continent,
affronting the bounties of civilization
and Christ,
Troublesome, contemptuous, archaic, with
thunder-storm hair
and snowline eyes, waiting. . . .

But that one feels such a force in wild nature itself is indubitable, and I have nothing but praise for Mr. Jeffers's descriptions. In fact he ends the poem with what I think is the most superb simile applied to the Rocky Mountains that I have ever read:

Where the tall Rockies pasture with their
heads down, white-spotted and streaked
like piebald horses, sharp withers
And thunder-scarred shoulders against
the sky,
standing with their heads down,
the snow-manes blow in the wind;
But they will lift their heads and whinny
when the riders come, they will stamp
with their hooves and shake down the
glaciers.

Jeffers will never get away from the rock and the hawk and the cruel trap of life and the uncaring face of nature. His themes have become rather redundant. But he is wielding some of the grandest language of our time. He seems to have little flexibility in his temperament but his stoicism is impressive. If I had a criticism of his method, I think that a line from Robert Nathan's foreword to his own new book would give me what I want. Nathan says, with extreme wisdom, "I have never believed that size and art were one." I am, myself, inclined to think that Jeffers sometimes confuses size with

art. He has, however, done one remarkable thing if no more (and in my own opinion he has done a good deal more), he has put the desolate, haunted, gigantic spirit of the California Coast on paper as no one has ever done before him. The sadistic people of his poems are tortured phantoms of that Coast, emblems of blind ancientness, without hope for man's world. But sometimes I fear that environment has well-nigh devoured this poet, until it has become excessively difficult for him to hear the desperate but dauntless voice of average humanity. It is not well to live too long aloof in one place.

In speaking of "Selected Poems" (Knopf) of Robert Nathan, I shall immediately lay myself open to the charge of log-rolling, inasmuch as the volume is very kindly dedicated "To Three Benéts." But I do not intend to log-roll, and I do not for a moment think that Mr. Nathan's poems are as good as those of Mr. A. E. Housman, of whom he reminds one only in the great carefulness of his selecting from his work. Out of all his work he will let stand but thirty-six poems, many of which are sonnets and the remainder short lyrics. What you do get from his work is the expression of a quiet courage, and a faintly amused sadness. The melancholy of his people is nowhere better expressed than in Nathan's

DIASPORA

Thou, Israel, on a foreign shore,
So low, so low, that once was great,
What altars do thy sons adore?
The golden calf, the scarlet whore,
Phoenicia's greed, Assyria's hate.

No more, Jerusalem, no more
Shalt thou behold thine ancient state,
Or round thee in the cloudy gloom
Remark the heavenly advocate.
The Syrian desert shrouds his fate,
The Lydian wilderness his tomb.

I think that Mr. Nathan will chiefly survive in American literature through some of his extraordinary prose, but he has a persuasive and musical way with the sonnet. "The book," he says, "is small, but in so far as it is able it sings." And that is no less than the truth. In his brief foreword he pays his respects to the "modern young gentlemen of England" saying:

I respect their force and energy, although few lines of their verse ever come to my mind. Their brains do not tire as soon as their hearts. But here, within these pages, you will find little wit and less invention. There is nothing here of more importance than what a child might sing, or a lover remember.

That is well said. And it strikes me shrewdly that "what a child might sing, or a lover remember," provided the art is there, will always be acceptable to the human race. Whatever systems of society we may contemplate, we will remain beings with the same emotions.

TEAR OUT THIS PAGE AND MAIL IT AT ONCE TO THE MANAGING EDITOR, SATURDAY REVIEW, 25 W. 45TH ST., NEW YORK CITY

WRITE YOUR OWN TICKET!

WITH your help, we are planning an interesting and unusual feature for this year's Christmas Number of *The Saturday Review*. It will be a plebiscite of the likes and dislikes of Saturday Review readers during the literary year 1935. All readers are invited, in fact urged, to fill in their preferences and pet aversions in the spaces below. Tear out and mail this page to the Managing Editor, or if you can't bear to mutilate a copy of the SRL, copy the questions and write the answers on a separate sheet of paper. You don't have to sign your name if you don't want to, but if you do, use the margin of this page. All votes will be counted, and the results will be printed in the Christmas issue.

IMPORTANT: *All votes must be in the hands of the Managing Editor by Monday, November 25th, and the earlier the better. The date of the Christmas issue is December 7th.*

HERE IS YOUR BALLOT

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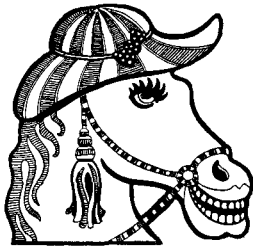
*A list of the regular departments in The Saturday Review follows.
Check the ones you like; cross out the ones you don't like:*

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Please tear out this page and mail it now. In order to discourage repeaters—not that we suspect anybody—this blank ballot will not be printed again. Send your votes to the Managing Editor, *The Saturday Review*, 25 West 45th Street, New York City. Your vote must be received before November 25th. Do Your Christmas Voting Early.

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Wordsworth as Man and Poet

Two Reviews by GEORGE McLEAN HARPER

WORDSWORTH'S ANTI-CLIMAX. By Willard L. Sperry. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1935. \$2.50.

POETS have generally died young, if not in body, yet in spirit. Wordsworth had the audacity to live till he was eighty, and quite naturally the poetry of his last forty years has less imaginative originality and less verbal magic than his earlier work. This may be called an inevitable misfortune, but not properly a fault. There are some readers and critics who care only for invention and verbal magic in poetry. They have small regard for poetry of exposition and argument. Most of Wordsworth's later poetry differs from his earlier not only in freshness but in purpose. His craftsmanship has improved, his technique has become perfect, but the man has changed, and the thoughts and principles which underlie his work are now determined in the main by new views of life.

Dean Sperry is not the first, though he is by far the best equipped, of those critics who have tried to indicate the point at which the change occurred and the reasons why it occurred. He has brought to his task an alert and open mind, rich literary culture, a very unusual acquaintance with the periodicals of the nineteenth century, and a lively, natural style. His book is instructive and good company. It is less fantastic than those of Mr. Herbert Read and Mr. Hugh I'Anson Fausset, who delved with the implements of psycho-analysis in the same field; and it is not such special pleading as Miss Edith Batho's exaltation of the man Wordsworth in his last forty years. There is only one rather disgusting, overstrained, and prying chapter in Dean Sperry's book; and as contemporary biography goes, that is a good record.

His main idea is that virtually all of Wordsworth's "good" poetry was written in a "golden decade," presumably between 1797 and 1807, though he seems uncertain about the dates, and that his "decline" was due chiefly to his holding fast to a "system" of composition. The weakness of this contention is that the later poetry, at least after 1814, does not conform to the system, which was inherent in the poems composed between 1797 and 1807. But there was a change, and on the whole a sad one. Dean Sperry is right in attributing it in large measure to the poet's premature aging. Though the years brought wider knowledge, they blunted the keen edge of sensation and reduced his courage. Responsibility made him cautious. But his artistic skill as a versifier improved with the years, and a rich harvest of glorious lines and exquisite passages, with here and there a whole perfect poem, can be gleaned from his autumnal fields.

Dean Sperry's book lacks coherence, or at least requires more than one reading to discover its precise significance. What is the verdict, and does it follow logically from the evidence and the argument? This is what a reader will ask, and the answer is not altogether satisfactory. In

detail there is much that is valuable, original, wise, and penetrating, the rich deposit of learning and experience. But there is a too ready assumption that almost all Wordsworth's poetry written after a loosely defined "golden age" is uninspired and unimportant. We have only to remember "Laodamia," "Dion," "The Pillar of Trojan," and a score of the finest sonnets in our language, to perceive the narrowness of this view.

THE EARLY LETTERS OF WILLIAM AND DOROTHY WORDSWORTH (1787-1805). Arranged and edited by Ernest de Selincourt. New York: Oxford University Press. 1935. \$8.75.

IF a person were lonely or socially unsatisfied he might find in this volume an ideal environment of warm human sympathy, natural behavior, small and great activities, comic and tragic occurrences, strong passions, and deep-rooted principles. Heaven be praised, William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy did not belong to a literary coterie or a bohemian "settlement," were not "arty," even in their most romantic years. There never was a Lake School of Poets, and the professorial term "Romanticism," which college lecturers find so convenient, does not include these very original and quite unclassifiable spirits. They reveal themselves in their letters as normal human beings, associating intimately with many relatives and friends, and living on comfortable terms with neighbors of various occupations and degrees of culture. We see them here as they lived from day to day and at such close range that we can easily imagine ourselves belonging to their circle and sharing their experiences. Where they differ from other people is in the vividness of their perceptions, the strength of their feelings, their command of expressive and exact language, and especially their brave determination to live according to their own plan, keeping themselves unspotted from the world.

The earliest letters are by Dorothy in her sixteenth year. William's begin when he was twenty. The present volume brings the writers down to a time when she was thirty-four and he thirty-five. It is the first of a series whose number no man can tell, even Professor de Selincourt making no prediction when I saw him a year ago half buried in piles of faded and almost undecipherable manuscript. Of the 241 letters in this first volume, 102 are printed from manuscript, seventy-eight are reproduced from other books in which they appeared in full, and sixty-one are entire letters that have hitherto been incompletely or incorrectly published. Most of those in the past two categories were used and often misused by Professor William Knight in his three-volume edition of "Letters of the Wordsworth Family," 1907, long since out of print. Knight employed a selective process, omitting much that is now of interest. He misread many passages, and