

# The PHOENIX NEST

CONTEMPORARY POETRY: BY WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

**I**N the last issue of this department I did not have space to complete my remarks upon the books of poetry from private presses. I shall do so now. I wish to make a note of the fact that Hawthorn House of Windham, Connecticut, sponsors *Brandon Gill's* "Death in April," a book which consists chiefly of sonnets that somehow slide off the mind.

More vivid is the little brochure of *Katharine Kennedy's* verse in "Poems," from the Terminal Press of Washington, D. C. More exotically modern than all, and incidentally involving better book-making and better writing, is a regular roc's egg from the Cassowary Press of New York City, "Sea Pieces and Other Poems" by *Forrest Anderson*. The capitals are my own. There are no capital letters connected with the book at all! By this time I've read a good deal of that sort of thing and it doesn't impress me tremendously. Of course there's a poem in it "for hart crane."

So you see how busy the small presses have been! The above is only to mention

a few of the books of poems that emerge steadily from this semi-private source. There are several thin volumes from Basil Blackwell in Oxford, also, but none seems really worth singling out for mention.

By this time you will probably be rather annoyed at me for not having mentioned a few books I think are really good. Still, I cannot recommend the new *Nathalia Crane* volume, "Swear by the Night" (Random House), as one of her best. And though "The Hermaphrodite" by *Samuel Loveman* (Caxton Printers, Caldwell, Idaho) is introduced with a flourish by *Benjamin De Casseres*, (even *Sir Edmund Gosse* has called the title poem vivid and accomplished, and this poet has received plenty of encomia elsewhere,) I consider Mr. Loveman merely a pleasing poet and no more. By contrast, get *Robert Fitzgerald's* poems in Arrow Editions. I shall devote more space to him later. He is a newcomer worthy of close attention. The Black Cat Press of Chicago (Addresses: 4940 Winthrop Avenue, Chicago, and 581 Snediker Ave., Brooklyn,

N. Y.), which published *Frank Marshall Davis's* "Black Man's Verse," now gives us a book of poems by my old English friend, *A. Hugh Fisher*, the famous etcher, called "Jemshyd in Exile," and also *Boris Todrin's* "The Room by the River," the latter a young writer in whose work the late *Edwin Arlington Robinson* was deeply and sincerely interested. I'll have more to say of Todrin too. Meanwhile, remember the publications of the Black Cat Press! They have someone there of unusual discriminatory powers.

A good book of free ballads, a book you will enjoy for its stories and its swinging rhythm, is *Derrick Norman Lehmer's* "Fighberry Dick, and other poems" (The Macmillan Company). Strangely enough Dr. Lehmer is a member of the Department of Mathematics in the University of California, and these ballads are but an avocation. Nevertheless, he has produced a book I have much enjoyed.

*Grace Buchanan Sherwood* has published her own poems, "Winter Bird Song," at 113 Sixth Street, Garden City, Long Island, and it is just about what you would expect. *Jamie Sexton Holme*, author of "I Have Been a Pilgrim" (New York: Henry Harrison) turns out to be Mrs. Peter H. Holme of Denver, Colorado, who was recently given an honorary M.A. by the University of Colorado, and who has inspired a long letter to me from a Denver correspondent. Mrs. Holme has certain merits, though they do not seem excessive. Another Henry Harrison publication, rather better than his average, is *Florence Ripley Mastin's* "Cables of Cobweb."

I have been criticized for devoting space to so many most minor poets. And yet it seems to me the only fair way that I can operate. As it is, I discard a certain percentage of the books that come in as not worthy of any mention at all. And I'd rather be over-conscientious with books that appear to be nullities and yet may hide a gem, than be so scornful that I'd be bound to overlook anything that wasn't put out by a leading publisher. That may sound smug, but I honestly try to play fair by all the orphan books that drift in. They can find asylum on my shelves, even if they don't always find mention!

But, Good Lord, I do get tired of the "Hearts and Flowers" motif of many housewifely poets who were cut out to be housewives and not poets and cherish extremely vague ecstasies in their souls. I honestly think—and hope to heaven they don't take my advice!—that if they went off and committed one good ripsnorting scarlet sin it would do more to tone up their systems than the tons of treacle through which they mew about their souls. That certainly is a garbled line, but you may get the sense of it!

It isn't that I'm unsympathetic—but enough is enough. To offset the dieaway school we have some good younger women poets. *Muriel Rukeyser* and *Shirley Barker* are the real thing, and here I may mention a woman writer older than these, a woman versatile in poetry, the novel, books for children, and the art of illustration—a woman who illustrates the vigor that remains in the old tradition of literature in the new world. Her name is *Rachel Field*.

The general public knows Miss Field

## "IF YOU AGREE WITH ME...



about what a novel should be, one of the recent English successes, *Richard Blaker's* 'Here Lies a Most Beautiful Lady' is a book you ought to read at your earliest opportunity."—HERSCHEL BRICKELL,

in the NEW YORK EVENING POST.

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Indianapolis THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY New York

best for her novel, "Time Out of Mind," but her "Points East" proved that she was a poet not only with charm but with power and a narrative ability that surpassed most of the women poets of her time. Now her new book, "Fear Is the Thorn" (Macmillan) will reward your purchase. Miss Field is no experimenter with form or wielder of loose rhetoric; nor does she write a psychological diary fuliginous to the average reader, or ride the high horse with Laura Riding—she merely has ideas, expresses them clearly, and writes verse that has its own individuality. She is not a poet of the first flight, but she can give you glimpses like this, from "The Pawnshop Window":

*I'll never pass the Pawnshop  
With its cluttered window pane,  
But I shall see you standing there  
Beside me in the rain.*

*Our breath made patches on the glass,  
Mist filmed our coats like dew,  
And you showed this and that to me,  
I that and this to you;—*

*The tarnished rings, the dangling chains,  
The silver plate embossed,  
The tray of medals bravely won,  
And still more bravely lost*

*Queer odds and ends of people's lives  
In hopeless litter spread,  
The way my mind is full of all  
You ever did,—or said.*

A hundred poets would have spoiled the expression of that simple idea. Miss Field models it with an inevitable twist of her own. Wholly delightful are "Night Thoughts from a Day-Bed" and it fully answers the late Mr. Kipling's "God of the Copybook Headings." It's a poem I want to commit to memory!

*—I've watched old dogs at the newest  
tricks,  
And built my houses of strawless  
bricks.  
After the turning I've tried the lane;  
Leaped, and then looked back again,  
In a bed I did not make I lie.  
Over spilt milk I often cry. . . .*

"The Ballad of the Seal Woman" that completes the book is very well done. You may say that so far I have not proved that Miss Field really writes poetry, though she does seem to write acceptable verse. Go to her book then. Hers are unpretentious rhymes, but they often take on the magic of poetry. Read "Spinner of Time," about the spider trapped in the alarm-clock, "To a Certain Gentleman," "Lament for Organ Grinders," "Black Alder Berry," and "Equinoxial," for choice. I think you will agree with me then.

#### SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 102)

WALTER DURANTY—  
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# The New Books

## Belles Lettres

ARTIFEX: SKETCHES AND IDEAS. By Richard Aldington. Doubleday, Doran. 1936. \$2.50.

This collection is a miscellany, some parts of which are memorable and some hardly worth preserving. *Artifex* (the title of the first essay) is the "maker of myths, music, and images." All real benefits to human life come from *Artifex*. From the caves of Altamira to the latest virtuoso, he ministers to the more sensitive and better life. The theologian, the scientist, and the business man are leagued against him. "By killing out the arts from life and life from the arts, the modern world has impoverished its vitality. Indeed it may be said to be killing off one by one the very faculties and experiences which are life." Or, to quote the conclusion of a later essay, "Purpose in Life": "There is no purpose in life. Life is an end in itself." But there seems to be an overweening assumption here. "Life" does not consist only of those faculties and experiences to which *Artifex* ministers. The faculties and experiences which the theologian, scientist, and business man exercise and minister to are just as much a part of life as the others. The philosophy of life-an-end-in-itself has been held by myriads of people from Epicurus to Pater. It involves a purpose as much as any other. The arguments pro and con are never final, but the practice of the theory is apt to be disappointing. With respect to the modern world and its predominating machinery, however sharp one's reaction may be, it does no harm to keep one's balance.

The character sketches, "Abel," "The Squire," and "Female Thinking Extravert" are particularly good and memorable. Abel was a West Indian negro servant, and the Squire an eccentric Englishman, whimsical and great hearted, who traveled much, studied birds, and climbed trees barefooted until he was killed by a fall at the age of eighty-two. "Female Thinking Extravert" is a dreadful title,

and should have been "Anita." The story is delicious, but Anita was not. She was an unattractive young woman, who thought that she ought to get rid of her virginity and was as solemn about it as a young convert to Calvinism. In the moral code of her set it was wrong not to have sexual experience; otherwise "one developed complexes and could not admire the best modern poetry or be eligible to the communist party." But for a lanky, unattractive young woman, with convictions but no passions, and coming from a rich and highly respectable family, the difficulties of doing what one ought were quite extraordinary.

A. C.

## Fiction

THE BARONESS. By Ernst Weichert. Norton. 1936. \$2.50.

The Baroness saw him coming through the fen, and watched him as he once more trod the earth of his home, home that was no more home to him. He had been too long among the dead: officially, on the rolls, on the monuments, and in the thoughts of his father and his friends; actually, in the peculiar hells that the French had known how to construct in Africa for a German soldier who had damaged a guard in attempting to escape. He had lost all that makes a man want a home, or a task to perform, or a friend to talk with. He had no more desire for the things of this life.

So the Baroness found him. She brought him home with her, and introduced him to those he once had known, now, in their own ways, as mad and as useless as he. Slowly, with great pain and with almost indescribable difficulty, he grew once again attached to his native soil; almost in spite of himself he saved the reason of an old friend; quite in spite of himself he took the last vestige of sanity from his father.

The Baroness led no normal life, and the lives of those about her were warped and strange, thanks to the war. She did

# Over the Counter

The Saturday Review's Guide to Current Attractions

Trade Mark	Label	Contents	Flavor
FLOWER OF THE GODS Achmed Abdullah & Anthony Abbot (Lee Furman: \$2.)	Novel	Defying Hindu magic and Tao, high Tibetan priest, Lee Breckinridge plucks the sacred flower and the pay-off is just too, too sad.	Buddhaful
PORT OF HEAVEN Thomas W. Metcalfe (Dutton: \$2.50.)	Adventure	Three-bottle hero reforms to clinch proud beauty and plenty of pieces of eight on Spanish Main, but it takes a long time.	Pot Likker
HORSETHIEF HOLE Robert Ames Bennet (Washburn: \$2.)	Western	Jim Friel meets up with Red Lor-kin—a no account hombre, horsethief, and snake. Perdita, gal, meets up with Jim. Biff! Bang! Zowie!	Middlin'