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The PHOENIX NEST

CONTEMPORARY POETRY: BY WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THAT hermit-sage of the Upper Hudson, the poet Arthur Davison Ficke, writes that he has recently been greatly depressed by Middleton Murry's biography, and by English biographers in general of late years—so sends me the following "sad little poem":

HINT TO MEMOIR-WRITERS

With lack of morals
I've no quarrels:
But there my tolerance ends.
So—if you please—
No biographies
That gnaw the bones of friends!

Two recent books of poetry have specially interested me: John Hall Wheelock's "Poems 1911-1936" (Scribners. \$2.50) and Genevieve Taggard's "Calling Western Union" (Harper's. \$2). Louise Bogan, in a recent interesting review in *The New Yorker*, both of Mr. Wheelock and Miss Taggard, has doubted, with respect to the former, whether poets still feel humanitarian and pantheistic. I think they do. They also feel communistic, as Miss Taggard now does. At the present moment the forces of sociological and economic change are challenging the poet as never before. It is a good thing, on the whole, for him so to be challenged. Max Eastman has been hammering at him (the generic him) for quite awhile, for God's sake—or rather, not—to be more scientific in his attitude. Actually, I am not so darned conservative myself, and I have a lot of sympathy with the radical poets. Some of them have written stirring things. But I still don't see that you can write the best poetry to order—to anyone's order. Mr.

Wheelock has always written out of his deepest feelings. He is not a great thinker. But he is a fine lyrist, and not, I think, in a minor strain. Miss Bogan seemed worried because he has used the word "belovéd" rather often, and, as an example of what is being done today, as a contrast, she reminded the reader of an amusing bit of patter by Mr. Auden. "Belovéd" has been spoiled for her by the popular song and the radio, and Mr. Auden seemed quite smart. He is smart—not that he isn't a lot more than that too—but his quip remains "patter," and I refuse to relinquish the word "belovéd" because asinine popular songs have bleated it. Miss Bogan admits that Mr. Wheelock's book "rises at moments to clear and moving poetic expression." It does; and I don't see much the matter with his material. Young love may have a different sort of "patter" today; but when Mr. Wheelock was writing of it it was no less beautiful than it always will be at its best. Nor do I think that awe and humility and rapture, the common feelings of man, will ever be liquidated so long as man remains aware of his cosmic predicament. Where I agree with Miss Bogan is in the feeling that Mr. Wheelock has written rather too much in the same strain. But if you care for pure song, here it is:

Sleep on, I lie at heaven's high oriels,
Over the stars that murmur as they go,
Lighting your lattice-window far below—
And every star some of the glory spells
Whereof I know.

I have forgotten you, long, long ago,
Like the sweet, silver singing of thin bells
Ended, or music fading faint and low.
Sleep on, I lie at heaven's high oriels,
Who loved you so.

This is in a category somewhat removed from "I had an aunt who loved a plant. But you're my cup of tea," the Auden note that sounded in Miss Bogan's mind. Also, take the really superb poem on "The Fish-Hawk," with its high wide sweep:

Till from that tower of ecstasy, that baffled height,
Stooping, he sank; and slowly on the world's wide way
Walked, with great wing on wing, the merciless, proud Might,
Hunting the huddled and lone reaches for his prey,
Down the dim shore—and faded in the crumbling light.

We may turn to the modern poet, Stephen Spender, when he writes

Can be deception of things only changing.
Out there
perhaps growth of humanity above the plain
hangs: not the timed explosion, oh but Time
monstrous with stillness like the himalayan range



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COME AFTER
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Out!

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and admit its fine last line; save that Wheelock is the more coherent and commands the more majestic music. I mean to compare neither poet to the other's detriment. But I do not find tremendous value in merely technical innovations, and I think almost anything worth expressing can be expressed clearly without warping syntax. Wheelock's "The Black Panther," "The Lion-House," and "Sunday Evening in the Common" remain first-rate poems by any standard that has the breath of life in it. And there is a good deal more in this volume that goes to the roots of human emotion. There's a fine restraint here too, and much insight. Few of our American poets have written more naturally or with more deftly concealed art.

I shall have to hold over till next time the review of Miss Taggard's "Calling Western Union."

**SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S
DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 134)**

**GEORGE CHAPMAN—
"BUSSY D'AMBOIS."**

As cedars beaten with continual
storms,
So great men flourish; and do imi-
tate
Unskilful statuary, who suppose,
In forming a Colossus, if they make
him
Straddle enough, strut, and look
big, and gape,
Their work is goodly.

The New Books

Fiction

SHANGHAI DEADLINE. By La Selle Gilman. Dodge. 1936. \$2.

This first novel is the story of a sensitive, ambitious, and conscientious young American reporter, Tony Colin, who has a lusty curiosity about everything. Going into the interior of China for a series of articles he finds that the military powers have turned the tea plantations into poppy fields, China's curse; he sees a "fine strong people beaten and shot and driven like animals," and in general inhuman chaos. His papers will have none of his impassioned writing, and he learns rebelliously that "a newspaperman in China, or at home, must interpret what he sees according to the lights of the paper he works for."

"Shanghai Deadline" is not a novel for the emancipation of the masses, but there is sincerity in the author's sympathy for the helpless lower classes. There is sincerity, too, in his unconventional love story. His novel is a good male reporter's very human piece of fiction.

G. N.

CANDLE INDOORS. By Helen Hull. Coward-McCann. 1936. \$2.50.

Miss Hull is a facile writer. She has moments of real acumen. Her plot sense is good. She knows all the little tricks of

moving people easily out of rooms. But we are afraid that she is one of those women who sit upstairs in the Astor bar after the theatre and order sweet-tasting cocktails.

She is on the fringes of modern life. She knows the words, but she cannot catch the tune or tempo. Her people are prigs, even when they are dissolute prigs. They drink uneasily; the word "boot-legger" jars in the middle of one of her pages. She shudders as her woman gynecologist tells "what men do to women" and she recoils painfully from the word "passion." And that is what makes "Candle Indoors" too refined and lifeless for our robust tastes.

The story begins with the death of Candace Carleton, leaving behind her three children that she bore to take the place of a husband who disappointed and failed her. The dead Candace, who is more important than any of the living people in this story, does not stand before us in her flesh and bones. She is too lavender-scented for the era in which she is placed, post-war and pre-repeal. Her husband, Arnold, is something else again. He is variously described as charming, handsome, an excellent business man, and "an old model male" who ought to be scrapped. He believes in the double standard for men and women and has the lack of taste to sit on the edge of the bed and mention it to his current lady friend.

(Continued on page 22)

No. 3 in a series of excerpts from a novel that savors richly of Elizabethan delights.

"Almost slyly Shakespeare glanced at Drake, noted the firm, well-rounded face, the blunt, aggressive nose, cocked at a sharp angle. That curly hair, growing smoothly from the forehead, would not be amiss on a black man, if only it were dark instead of brown, bleached almost to straw colour. He turned back to the fire again. What fun life was! What interest it offered to the watching eye."

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