

portance for our public discussions, if they propose to be full and frank ones. I am inclined to think it has prophetic value, in the sense in which certain features of three New Deal landslides in as many successive elections had that value. The South and the West do not become more comfortable under the economic dominion of the North. The Constitution has given them plenty of power to relax it.

*John Crowe Ransom is professor of English at Vanderbilt University.*

## East London Swamp

*THE MARSH. By Ernest Raymond. New York: Frederick A. Stokes. 1937. \$2.75.*

Reviewed by GEORGE DANGERFIELD

"HERE, then, are the two cities: the city of the masters in the security of the hills, and the city of those who live on the lowland, very close to danger, destitution and death." This is London, and Danny Counsel belonged to the lowlands, or the Marsh, and specifically to that part of the Marsh which is called East London. His father was a London dock laborer, and the only future which Danny could see for himself was a future on the dole.

Odd jobs—he was a personable youth, and was therefore able to get them occasionally—could not keep his girl faithful to him when her favors were being solicited by somebody who had climbed into the white collar class. Danny took this with bitterness, but did not see exactly where to place the blame. And then, drifting into a socialist parade, it occurred to him for the first time that wealth might have been withheld from him, not because he did not deserve it, but because he had not been born into it. And it was this piece of rudimentary thinking which, combined with the loss of one girl and his need to find another, ultimately made him an expert thief, led him into prison, and finally left him mortally wounded in a dark alley.

Mr. Raymond's resolute sense of the unresolved injustice between the city on the hills and the city in the marsh, gives this novel its unity. Otherwise he is always at his best when exposing the bewilderment and hypocrisy of his middle-class characters, who are always clearer in the imagination than Danny or Danny's companions.

Mr. Raymond seems to have lived more in his own mind than in Danny's; and that is perhaps why, when you have finished the book, what remains with you is more likely to be a sense of the principles than of the persons involved. But that sense will have been firmly planted. For the author exposes with unrelenting intensity the fact that there is little mercy and less understanding in the agents of the city on the hills; and little hope for those who play a lone hand in the city on the marsh.

# Three American Poets

## THE LAST LOOK AND OTHER POEMS.

*By Mark Van Doren. New York: Henry Holt & Company. 1937. \$2.*

*THE GREAT HORSE. By Helene Magaret. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc. 1937. \$2.*

*YEAR'S END. By Josephine W. Johnson. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1937. \$2.*

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

WE need no proof today that there is a poetry characteristically American; these three books, all different in character and in method, seem so to me, and reflect credit upon the states of Illinois, Nebraska, and Missouri, in which states, respectively, the authors were born. Mr. Van Doren, although born on a Middlewestern farm, has in his poetry breathed more the spirit of New England, from his own farm of today in the hills of Connecticut. He has learned from Robert Frost. But his own character and insight have now become deeply impressed upon verse of distinction. He has looked long at country landscapes and people, and has meditated upon them profitably in lyrical narrative that has its appropriate rhythms. Half a dozen books of shorter poems, and one long narrative, "Jonathan Gentry," attest his power. This latest volume is characteristic, and contains memorable work. He and Miss Johnson are the most subtle of these three poets, and both accomplished in their craft. Some of Mr. Van Doren's present poems go back in memory to "the dun, low western house,"—a simple and beautiful poem of family voices remembered—to the old cornetist they called "the Frisco nightingale," to old men dying, a neighbor girl, the little doctor, the ghost horse, Uncle Roger, and a boy's first ride in a train. Perhaps "The Letter" is the best of this type, simple and yet with superbly adroit phrase that John Donne himself might have commended. In the space allowed me it is hard to give a complete idea of this volume, because it is varied, there are five sections, and over seventy poems. It is not to be read complete in an hour, and there are obscurities which spring, it seems to me, from subtlety of apprehension rather than from confusion of thought. The spirit in this poet is sensitive and fine, nor does it despise a strong earthiness mixed with bitterness and wit. He is worth your acquaintance.

Helene Magaret of Nebraska produced an unusual narrative in "The Trumpeting Crane." Now, in the westward migration of the Mormons following the killing of Joseph Smith, she has found a powerful theme, the wild horse of the American dream being its symbol, the story that of the wagons of the Latter-day Saints rolling westward from Nauvoo. Specifically,



JOSEPHINE W. JOHNSON

the tale concerns Lucinda Holman who seeks for westward freedom, chafing at a fanatic faith. Finally she finds her satisfying love in a frontier doctor. There are other saliently drawn characters, the clash of lives, desperation, perseverance, and drama. The background is well-studied and made vivid. The poem is written in rhymed loose pentameter, with a few interludes of a simple ballad measure. Sometimes the verse stiffens and seems awkwardly constrained, but for the most part this is good work of a different kind.

Josephine Winslow Johnson is, of course, the brilliant young novelist who won the Pulitzer Prize two years ago with "Now in November." Her "Year's End" is a notable book. In free verse, unrhymed or rhymed, the poem's rhythm fits its statement, and she speaks out of the experience of love and life with an individual voice. These forty-seven poems, of various lengths, all have something to say, and her manner of saying it is her own. "The White Spring," "Final Autumn," "Under the Sound of Voices," and the long poem last in the book called "Year's End," are impressive; and some of the shorter ones contain considerable sapience. Neither can one read "In This Hour" or "This Wind That Rises" without hearing the voice of the bitter present speaking in an inexorable tone. There is salt in this verse. It is realistic and unhoodwinked. Sometimes the words are trenched deep by irony, as in "To a Certain Author" and "On a Decision." Miss Johnson writes strictly, avoiding the superfluous. The more personal poems take suffering with stoicism. In "The Snow-Blind" the poet has a phrase, "the mind's blinding and momentary birth of sight" that epitomizes the mood out of which real poems are written.


*The Saturday Review*  
of LITERATURE

BERNARD DeVOTO.....Editor  
NOBLE A. CATHCART.....Publisher  
AMY LOVEMAN.....Associate Editor  
GEORGE STEVENS.....Managing Editor  
HENRY SEIDEL CANBY }  
WILLIAM ROSE BENET } Contributing  
CHRISTOPHER MORLEY } Editors

THE SATURDAY REVIEW is indexed in the  
"Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature."

THE SATURDAY REVIEW cannot assume re-  
sponsibility for the return of unsolicited  
manuscripts submitted without an addressed  
envelope and the necessary postage.

Copyright, 1937, Saturday Review Co., Inc.



## The Faculty Style

**A** FEW weeks ago an article by a college teacher of literature came to this office on a morning when we were sending to the printer an article on the same subject by a professional writer. The sharp contrast between them was everywhere in favor of the professional but was most marked in the writing itself. The professor's article was fifty percent longer than its content justified. It was ponderous, torpid, opaque, rambling, diluted. There were no incorrect case forms and no verbs at variance with their subjects, but fully half of the sentences were inept enough to rouse an English A instructor's passions. They strayed away from their original objectives, or they bogged down in vague and abstract polysyllables, or they frayed out in that maddening indefiniteness which permits the writer to believe that he has said something, perhaps something pretty acute, when he has actually said nothing at all. It was a villainous bit of writing. Our reviewers are never permitted to write that badly and, sending it back, we wanted to inclose with it a copy of the theme manual used at its author's university.

It started us thinking: as its author would say, it gave us furiously to think. Many English teachers write well or even brilliantly; we use some two dozen of that species as reviewers in this magazine. But for every one who writes well, and for every two who write acceptably, there must be from ten to fifty who write abominably. We turned to the latest issue of *PMLA*, the house-organ of the Modern Language Association, which chance had confided to the same mail. For years that quarterly has served us as a restorative whenever we have felt that our mental powers might be waning, but we had never before read it with an eye to style. So from now on we are going to attribute at least twenty percent of the anesthesia of *PMLA* to sheer bad writing. Look at it yourself: it is the most hopeless kind of

prose, flabby but resistant, without grain or crystalline structure, amorphous, gelatinous, verbose, tautological, inert. If worse writing regularly gets published in the United States, the periodicals that contain it do not exchange with *The Saturday Review*.

Yet the people who write that gruel are the people who give college courses in writing. Whenever we visit a college, we find the English Department in a mood of soul-searching and dismay because the undergraduates aren't ambitious to write great novels or five-act dramas in blank verse. The profs are always asking one another why their students don't write better, why more novelists and poets don't sprout under the local elms, what can be done to create a "climate" favorable to the excitements and enthusiasms of literature, how alma mater can best fan such sparks of literary talent as from time to time blow in with the freshman class. Their concern is genuine—and it is pathetic. But it almost never gets intense and intelligent enough to do the most obvious and hopeful thing, which is to scrutinize the local courses in composition.

Here and there, in isolated instances, in this college or that one, the teaching of composition is strikingly better than it was a generation ago. But it remains pretty bad on the average. Bad? Dreadful, scandalous, sometimes unspeakable. If there are a dozen colleges in the United States which do not assume that anyone can teach composition and that the feeblest members of the department can be most usefully occupied in teaching it, if there are six colleges where the teacher of composition is not looked down on by his colleagues and kept permanently in the junior ranks, we have somehow missed them in our travels, which have been pretty extensive. The boys mourn because they don't seem to be producing a decent quota of the nation's novelists, but they continue to staff their courses in writing with the people who write the stuff that *PMLA* prints.

Not all this frustration is due to the contempt of predestinate genitive-counters, which is a thinly masked suspicion and envy. Some educators have held that training in writing must be regarded as "professional" and must therefore be confided to the graduate schools. That is theoretically profound but the slightest experience of writing, or of undergraduate illiteracy, destroys the theory. Other presidents, deans, and department chairmen sincerely believe that writing cannot be taught; and, if it can't be, there is no sense in spending money, care, or thought on the courses that perfunctorily try to teach it. But that idea is simple nonsense. Or academic nonsense.

No one can make a novelist or a poet out of a college student whom an all-wise providence has designed to be a professor of education; no composition teach-

er can add the twentieth part of a cubit to any literary talent. But any intelligent student can be taught to say clearly and decently what he wants to say, which is more than the average English professor, if *PMLA* represents him, has ever learned. And any student who has literary talent can be helped on his way—can be taught many things that will implement his talent, draw it out, mature it, and help it to work free of its earliest contradictions and impediments.

A period of apprenticeship is an excellent thing for any artist. If a writer can get it in college, so much the better. But you have to apprentice a writer to a writer. The particular skill he is trying to learn can be learned only from someone who has that skill. Only one kind of person can teach a college student how to be a writer: a person who is himself a writer. Writers have been there; they have learned how to do the job. Looking at a student's manuscript, they know in their nerves and by the patterns of professional experience what is wrong with it, what must be done to make it better, how the next job can best take off from where this one leaves off. They can communicate their knowledge because it consists of experience—and that is how writing can be taught. The occasional exception, a Copyer or a Dean Briggs, is an inspired teacher—and there are no rules about inspiration.

The simple first step, then, in any program to improve the teaching of composition at a college, is to hire writers to do it. Every time a poet or a novelist is taken into an English faculty the situation improves by just that much, but there are still far too few of them. The next step is to realize and acknowledge that such teaching is just as valuable as any other in the department of English, that it is probably more difficult to do and certainly harder to get. This will require teachers of literature and scholarly method to abate their contempt, whether of their own impulse or with outside help. Literary talent, of itself alone, does not necessarily make a man inferior to scholars whose business is to lecture about it.

The literary climate so much desired will prove to be a function of literary people. It consists only of like-minded people, undergraduates and their elders, who are interested in literature from within rather than from without, and who like to get together and talk shop, discussing their common problems. The colleges will have more of it when they make room for people who are not only interested in the arts but actually practise them as well. If you want to produce writers at alma mater, you have got to have some writers there for the undergraduates to make friends with. Judging by the products that the trade journal prints, alma mater hasn't many of them on hand just now.