

# Between the Lyric and the Didactic

AUTUMN JOURNAL. By Louis MacNeice. New York: Random House. 1940. 96 pp. \$1.50.

Reviewed by SELDEN RODMAN

THERE are two kinds of personal poem which everyone can enjoy: in times of stability and smugness it is fun to watch the anarchist-hero flouting all discipline, but in times of great confusion the portrait of the artist seeking order by laughing intelligently at his own weakness may act as a purge. Byron wrote both kinds of poem successfully. Mr. MacNeice, in "Autumn Journal," does the second superlatively well, condemning (never too heavily) his own moral paralysis, looking in Barcelona, in the Greek classroom, and into his more personal dilemmas for the seeds of a new, more valid set of beliefs. And like Byron, who could never be sure whether Napoleon was a conquering tyrant or the instrument of the liberation of the French Revolution, MacNeice, like the most intelligent of his countrymen, is torn between the conviction that fascism must be destroyed and the suspicion that by merely invoking force to drown it in blood at the unclean boundaries of Empire, the civilized will in turn become the uncivilized:

And we who have been brought up  
to think of "Gallant Belgium"  
As so much blague  
Are now preparing again to essay  
good through evil  
For the sake of Prague;  
And must, we suppose, become uncritical, vindictive,  
And must, in order to beat  
The enemy, model ourselves upon  
the enemy,  
A howling radio for our paraclete.

The poem, as the poet himself points out in the introductory note, is half way between the lyric and didactic, and consisting as it does of what the poet feels at the moment, "to attempt scientific truthfulness would be—paradoxically—dishonest." Written in a kind of elastic quatrain, it indicates to this reviewer a development in modern poetry quite at variance with the theory of Cleanth Brooks and other critics who see the obscure "interior drama" of the "metaphysical" school supreme. Mr. MacNeice, of course, uses many of the devices of symbolism and even the effective tags and incongruities of the "surrealists"—but sparingly, and always in nice subordination to the idea he is trying to get across, condemning that

System that gives a few at fancy  
prices  
Their fancy lives  
While ninety-nine in the hundred  
who never attend the banquet  
Must wash the grease of ages off  
the knives . . .

looking for "a warm wind that blows the bodies of men together"; observ-

ing uneasily "All quiet on the Family Front"; seeing the white cut wood "like the roast flesh of chicken. Each tree falling like a closing fan" as the hill-tops are made bald for anti-aircraft; hating desperately to abandon the familiar, even when it has long since been abandoned by the intellect as "wormy"; hoping that this age-old Heraclitan destruction which storms up even out of the mellowed classics, will give way to a time

Where the individual, no longer  
squandered  
In self-assertion, works with the  
rest, endowed  
With the split vision of a juggler,  
and the quick lock of a taxi,  
Where the people are more than a  
crowd.

In MacNeice's world there is no need deliberately to "assimilate the steam-engine" as the Imagists so self-consciously tried to do. The assimilation has been done. The steam engine

is as much a part of the "tradition" as Mickey Mouse, Aristophanes, and the Civil War in Spain. Six lines from a reference to Oedipus at Colonus, lifebuoy soap floats quite naturally. The past becomes a living commentary on the present. At the gallery of old masters is found "personality like a silent bomb Lurking in the formal portrait" and

Christ who should lie quiet in the  
garden  
Flowered in flame instead.

But if this new kind of poetry is to come to full fruition, its colloquialism must be taken far beyond the personal "journal" and its seed must find a richer season to flower in than "Autumn." It is significant that Mr. MacNeice, like so many of his gifted English contemporaries, has just come to America. If we Americans can assimilate some of their traditional subtlety and historical poise, giving them in return some of our athletic extraversion and faith in the common man, that union may see a narrative poetry of great power.

## The Criminal Record

The Saturday Review's Guide to Detective Fiction

Title and Author	Crime, Place and Sleuth	Summing Up	Verdict
THE FRENCH KEY <i>Frank Gruber</i> (Farrar & Rinehart: \$2.)	Gadget for discouraging Manhattan dead-beats dumps two care-free souls into murderous muddle, which John Fletcher untangles.	Liberal education in numismatics, and how to live luxuriously on no funds; also much lively chatter and tricky plotting.	High test
MURDER BICARB <i>Delia Van Deusen</i> (Bobbs Merrill: \$2.)	Double evenoming in old folks' retreat, with subsequent fatal bludegoning, cleared up by observant young matron.	Crotchety ancients vigorously portrayed, and plot has neat final twist. Agreeable amateur sleuthness works nicely.	Garrulous but good
X MARKS THE SPOT <i>Lee Thayer</i> (Dodd, Mead: \$2.)	Cal. movie singer stabbed with surgical knife. Peter Clancy's knowledge of American music helps him solve it.	Suspicion nicely distributed among interesting characters. Deducing, thanks to super-valet Wiggarr, well groomed.	Amiable
THE PRIVATE PRACTICE OF MICHAEL SHAYNE <i>Brett Halliday</i> (Holt: \$2.)	Miami private 'tec, taking long chances, finally nails demises of small-time gamblers to door of powerful malefactors.	Seamy side of Florida life vividly depicted, with chief character dealing, and receiving, mighty wallops on all sides.	Tough-guy epic
MURDER LOVES COMPANY <i>John Mersebau</i> (Lippincott: \$2.)	Treasure Island at Pacific coast fair scene of deaths by gat and poison gas. College prof. and girl reporter aid police.	Good background and well handled talk cover up deficiencies of yarn that has habit of rambling all over lot.	Average
NO MOURNERS PRESENT <i>F. G. Presnell</i> (Morrow: \$2.)	John Webb, handy-fisted lawyer, out-slugs and outshoots vicious gangsters and solves slaying of mid-western contractor.	Plentiful action, exuberant conversation involving Webb's amusingly dumb wife, and finish that reveals benefits of classical education.	Good fun
THE PORTRAIT OF JIRJOHN COBB <i>Harry Stephen Keeler</i> (Dutton: \$2.)	Three suspicious characters and Western Sheriff on flood-endangered islet swap strange stories. No deaths.	More coherent than most Keeler yarns, with customary flights of fantasy and climax that stagger credulity.	For Keeler fans
MURDER TIMES THREE <i>Amelia Reynolds Long</i> (Phoenix: \$2.)	Returned explorer shot in Phila. apt. Slinky secretary later murdered. Investigator Tre-lawney leads cops to solution.	Plot basically sound but melodramatic fixins, including young South-erner with goshawful accent, make story pretty tough sledding.	Exasperating

# The New Books

## Biography

**PAULINE FREDERICK: ON AND OFF THE STAGE.** By Muriel Elwood. Chicago: A. Kroch. 1940. 225 pp. \$3.

A book at this time on Pauline Frederick cannot have the wide appeal it would have had about twenty years ago, when she was at the top of her fame; she had become a player of secondary importance in cast-lists by the time she died in 1938 at the age of fifty-five. Yet in spite of the shoddy writing—the prose style is reminiscent of the dull stretches between the lurid bits in photoplay magazines—this volume has a certain claim on the interests of those who follow the theater closely, and who remember the days of Pauline Frederick's ascendancy. She was never a "great" actress; her outstanding success on both stage and screen was in that outstanding triumph of hokum, "Madame X." Miss Elwood fortunately does not claim too much for her on the acting side.

The personal portrait of Pauline Frederick, as presented here, makes her seem a little incredible: she appears as too perfect. Miss Elwood does a plausible job of rationalizing the five marriages. The picture that finally rises from the page is, owing to Miss Elwood's patient assembling of facts and in spite of her crude writing, the essential picture of the successful actress in any epoch—a woman beautiful in a stately way, intrinsically happy, considerate of younger talents, unconsciously a bit pompous, doomed to suffer many personal losses, and always generous.

H. T. M.

**FRONTIER DOCTOR.** By Urling C. Coe. Macmillan. 1940. 264 pp. \$2.50.

A certain well-known weekly lists among its prayers for 1940 a plea for relief from doctors' autobiographies. And by the end of 1939 it did seem as if every manner of doctor had now told his story and that it was the turn for some other group—say firemen. Yet the year is hardly a month old and already to the reviewer's table comes another. This latest contributor is a true frontier practitioner.

Although Dr. Coe is still in his fifties, he has doctored sheep-men and cowboys, gamblers and camp prostitutes, traveled hundreds of miles on horseback to pull a tooth, sew up a bandit, or saw off the leg of a lumber-jack. It all sounds like the old West of the 70s. Yet all this happened after the present century was well on its way. In 1905 when Dr. Coe, a boy of twenty-three, went out to the great open spaces of Oregon and set up an office in Bend, Jim Hill had not yet extended his railroad that far, the lumber barons had not reached the

great forests, and there still remained in the Northwest a frontier not the creation of Hollywood.

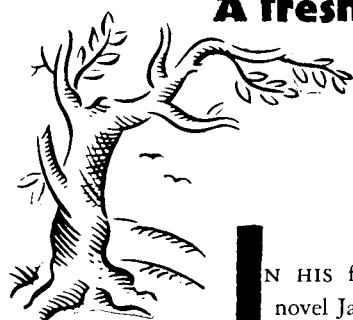
From the first there was plenty of practice for the young doctor. In spite of recurring typhoid epidemics and economic depression, the community thrived, grew into a bustling little city with a hospital, nurses, and a health department. Dr. Coe grew with it, became a banker, and at last the town's mayor. He was obviously equipped with tremendous physical vitality, a hearty sense of humor, and plenty of horse sense, all of which he certainly needed for his varied tasks. If some of his stories almost threaten our credulity, we nevertheless will take his word for them. His style may have more breeziness than literary distinction, but he tells his

story with full-flavored gusto, and it should appeal especially to all lovers of Westerns as well as to those who like to read of "cases." M. S. U.

## Fiction

**THE ELEPHANT IS WHITE.** By Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon. Farrar & Rinehart. 1940. 278 pp. \$2.50.

Here the White Russians in Paris—who in this book are always white elephants—get theirs as the Soviets got theirs in "Ninotchka." Unfortunately, the novel is neither as witty nor as amusing as the movie, nor does it offer a role worthy of Greta Garbo. Peter Pyke, son of an English hotel-king, blunders into a club of elegant émigrés, who spend incredible effort and ingenuity in avoiding work. He learns to love their easy ways, so foreign to the hotel business, their disdain of bourgeois morality, their at-



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