

Verse and the Times

THE LISTENING LANDSCAPE. By Marya Zaturenska. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1941. 87 pp. \$1.75.

Reviewed by LOUIS UNTERMAYER

UNTIL Marya Zaturenska was awarded the Pulitzer Prize about two years ago, her critics were of two sorts: those who patronized her work and those who, with even greater condescension, were ignorant of it. "Clear and cold" was the report of the more superficial, and, with few exceptions, even those who admitted the poet's precise gift found her "detached," "abstract," "removed from the immediate world." Only the stubbornly predetermined will be able to repeat the charge of aloofness after "The Listening Landscape"; all but the most prejudiced will have to concede the instinctive warmth beneath the smooth exterior, the prevailing and penetrative glow.

The new poems show an ever-increasing sympathy and attachment; they imply it when they do not actually say it. "Interview in Midsummer" is an uncanny trance-like monologue, but what is unsaid is envisioned in any woman's universe; "In Hostile Lands All Tongues Were Alien" is as timely as it is compassionate; "Girl's Song" is a lyric of bittersweet grace; "The White Dress" is an extraordinary evocation, the growth of a symbol from haunting beauty to horrible possession; "Century of Athletes," is an eloquent summons of the wraith of Kafka, "the shadow-eaten Jew"; the title poem is unforgettable in its silent tensility; "The Lovers" is, in its skilful repetitions and contrapuntal images, one of the most musical and richly moving love-poems of our time.

The ripe communication and the sure craft go hand in hand, particularly in the sudden contrast of word and mood, scene and sense. "Watchers in the Sacred Wood" is a hushed rite performed among wide-winding terraces, massive rocks, high tumbling water; the next poem, "The Seance," is a backstreet ritual in a drab room, with a plain table and fading yellow curtains. "The Thread of Ariadne," "Envoy to Aurora," "The Casket of Pandora," and the magnificent "Head of Medusa" bring fresh life to mythological figures, not merely reanimating a legend but creating a new and complex character. For proof one need only observe the slowly mounting force of the last named poem, the

monster hating itself and the woman waiting fearfully yet hopefully for the deliverer who can bring nothing but death, and for whom her serpents stir. The poem, pitched toward its climax, pauses and balances itself on a quivering point of suspense—

And now the end nears. Through
steelpoint warm blood
Shall flow in purification. Her world
made clean and good,
Through pain the Immortal's hatred
is withstood.
Even now in the gold shield
One faces her, his life-blood un-
congealed . . .

Critics will be tempted to define this poet's simple yet subtle accent, to fix her "place" and to trace her "influences." The last are far to seek. The surface of Miss Zaturenska's work is conventional, she uses all the properties of traditional verse; yet she follows no school, adheres to no convention. Her transfigured images and personal living landscapes sometimes call to mind the English poet Ruth Pitter, to whom Miss Zaturenska dedicates one of her most spontaneous poems; but her poetry is like that of no one writing on either side of the Atlantic. Without limiting itself to a program, the poetry is distinctly of these times and yet occupied with a sense of timelessness. Superficially these lyrics may seem to be pastoral-historical—the jacket is not far wrong in mentioning Marvell, Waller, and Clare—but the synthesis is new: a combination of delicate observation and modern vision, of sharp personality and shadowed allegory. In spirit as well as substance this half-musing, half-singing verse has a form of its own, a pure shape rare at any time, rarer than ever today. But it is not the cold purity of crystal. It is the purity of fire, of a quiet but intense flame.



Marya Zaturenska

Lotie Jacobi

OPEN HOUSE. By Theodore Roethke. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1941. 70 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by W. H. AUDEN

BOTH in life and art the human task is to create a necessary order out of an arbitrary chaos. A necessary order implies that the process of its creation is not itself arbitrary; one is not free to create any order one chooses. The order realized must, in fact, have been already latent in the chaos, so that successful creation is a process of discovery. As long as this remains latent and unconscious, conscious life must appear arbitrary; one grows up in the degree to which this unconscious order becomes conscious and its potentialities developed, to the degree that one's life ceases to be arbitrary, to the degree that one becomes both conscious of and true to one's fate. An artist is someone who is able to express his human development in a public medium.

A work of art, like a life, can fail in two different ways: either, in terror of admitting that there is any chaos, it takes refuge in some arbitrary conscious order it has acquired ready-made from others or thought up itself on the spur of the moment, some order which, because it ignores the chaos that exists can do nothing with it but suppress it; or, lacking the courage and the faith to believe that it is possible and a duty to bring the chaos to order, it contents itself with a purely passive idolization of the flux. In poetry, the first attitude leads to a lifeless academic rhetoric; the second to the formless, the vague, the nonsensical and boring stream-of-consciousness.

A good poet can be recognized by his tense awareness of both chaos and order, the arbitrary and the necessary, the fact and the pattern: as Angelus Silesius says:—

Fuerwahr, wer diese Welt
Recht nimmt in Augenschein,
Muss bald Democritus,
Bald Heraclitus sein.

By such a test, Mr. Roethke is instantly recognizable as a good poet. He is well aware of "Confusion's core set deep within," "The ugly of the universe," "the menace of ancestral eyes," and their terrifying laughter rumbling in one's belly. He is willing to acknowledge the facts of suffering, "the rubbish of confusion," whether it is his own or that of others, the poor and those unfortunate ones for whom

Acceleration is their need:
A mania keeps them on the move
Until the toughest nerves are frayed.

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They are the prisoners of speed
Who flee in what their hands have
made

because he knows that "A scratch forgotten is a scratch infected," but he is not content to lie down and blubber, but accepts them as a challenge:

With these I match my little wit
And earn the right to stand or sit,
Hope, love, create, or drink and die;
These shape the creature that is I.

The anger will endure,
The deed will speak the truth
In language strict and pure.
I stop the lying mouth:
Rage warps my clearest cry
To witless agony.

Many people have the experience of feeling physically soiled and humiliated by life; some quickly put it out of their mind, others gloat narcissistically on its unimportant details; but both to remember and to transform the humiliation into something beautiful, as Mr. Roethke does, is rare. Every one of the lyrics in this book, whether serious or light, shares the same kind of ordered sensibility: "Open House" is completely successful.

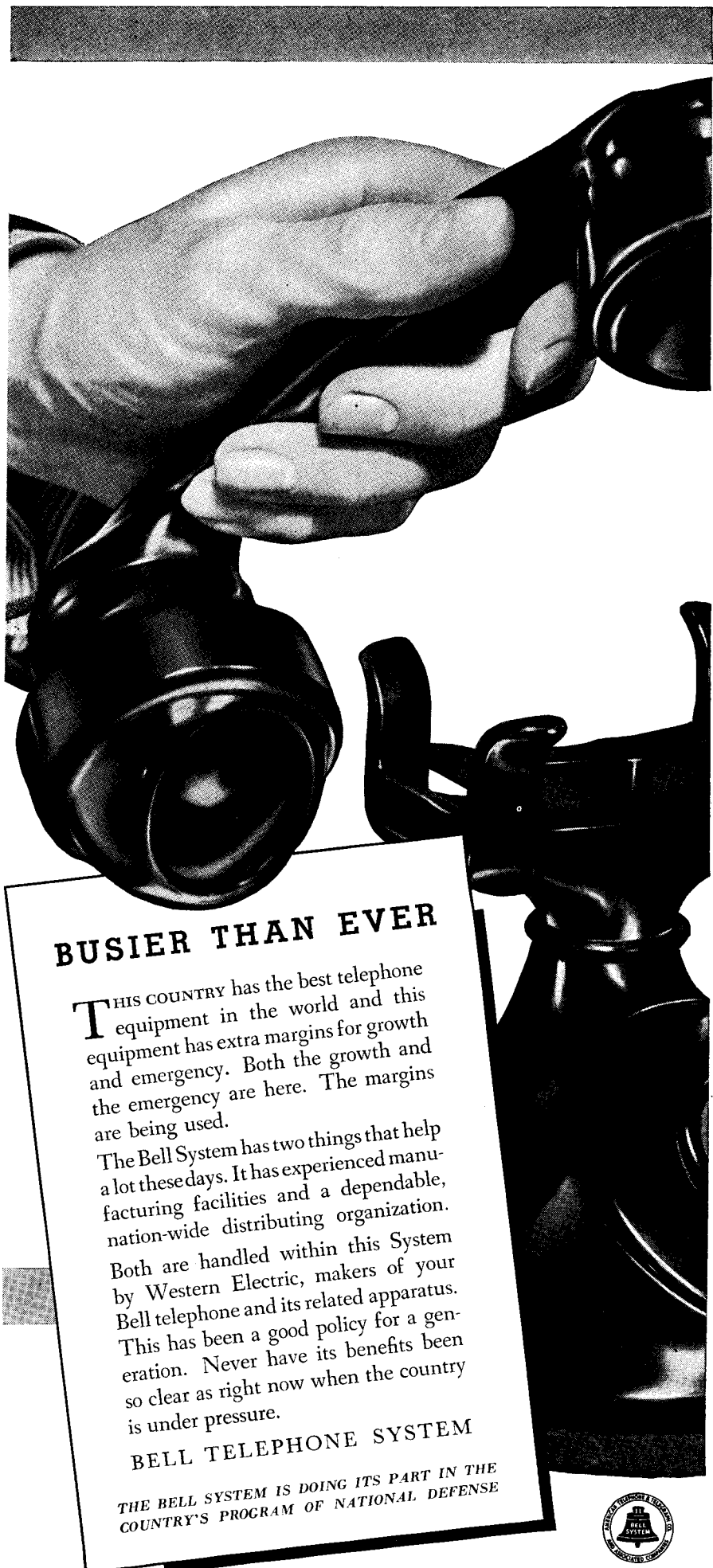
The only question which remains, and it concerns the poet rather than the reader, is; "Where is Mr. Roethke to go from here? Having mastered, with the help of Herrick, Marvell, and Blake, a certain style of expression, how is he to develop it, to escape being confined to short, and usually iambic, lyrics?"

It is possible, I think, that Mr. Roethke is trusting too much to diction, to the poetic instrument itself, to create order out of chaos. For poetry is only an instrument; it can be sharpened, but it cannot by itself widen the area of experience with which it deals. Poe was quite right in saying that an interest in poetry alone, can only produce short lyrics, but wrong, I think, in concluding from this that only short lyrics are poetry. It is possible that Mr. Roethke has read quite enough English poetry for a bit, and should now read not only the poetry of other cultures, but books that are neither poetry nor about poetry. For every artist must be like one of his own characters who

... cried at enemies undone
And longed to feel the impact of
defeat.

Otherwise he may be in danger of certain experiences becoming compulsive, and of either, like Emily Dickinson and A. E. Housman, playing more and more variations on an old theme, or, like Rimbaud, of coming to the end of his experiences and ceasing to write.

But this, as I have said, is Mr. Roethke's problem, not ours. In "Open House" he has already done more than enough to make us lastingly happy and grateful.



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