

Five Veterans

THE GAP OF BRIGHTNESS. By F. R. Higgins. New York: The Macmillan Co. 85 pp. \$1.25.

POEMS, 1925-1940. By Louis MacNeice. New York: Random House. 326 pp. \$2.50.

DEATH AT SEA. By Frederic Prokosch. New York: Harper & Bros. 52 pp. \$2.

AND IN THE HUMAN HEART. By Conrad Aiken. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 87 pp. \$1.50.

50 POEMS. By E. E. Cummings. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 50 pp. \$1.50.

Reviewed by DUDLEY FITTS

THE recent death of F. R. Higgins, coming so soon after that of his great friend and patron William Butler Yeats, underscores that irreplaceable loss to contemporary literature. Higgins was not a prolific poet, and even this small and carefully weeded-out selection is remarkably uneven; but at his best—in such poems as “At Flock Mass” and “The Old Jockey” and “Song for the Clatter Bones,” with its memorable opening:

God rest that Jewy woman,
Queen Jezebel, the bitch—

he both challenges and amply rewards the closest reading. His failures are failures either of imitation—of Go-garty, of Colum, of Yeats—or of a blustering selfconscious Irishness that recalls St. Patrick's Night in South Boston rather than in Dublin. But when he is not Insisting on the Green, and, above all, when he comes out of another husband's bedroom at last and sits down before his own fire, his poems are honest and right.

Louis MacNeice is at once a more exciting and a more disappointing Irishman. A few years ago, with the first Faber publication of his poems, he seemed to me the most promising member of Auden & Co., Ltd. I can still remember the thrill with which I first read “Eclogue by a Five-Barred Gate”—which is still a fine poem, in spite of its inept last four lines—and the “Eclogue for Christmas”; or, later, the superb *élan* of the last two stanzas of his translation of Horace's “Solvitur acris hiems”; or, still later, certain of the Iceland poems, and “Bagpipe Music,” and perhaps a few pages of *Autumn Journal*. But he is too facile, and certainly he publishes too much. It is all very well for him to say that he writes because he enjoys it, “as one enjoys swimming or swearing,” in his latest poems, at

least, he seldom communicates that enjoyment—only a sense of skill, a trick neatly and rather too smartly turned, an insistence upon being heard on every subject at every possible moment. He still remains an exasperating and fascinating craftsman; but an oath of silence for a year, say, would hurt him not at all, and I suspect that it would revitalize his poetry.

Mr. Prokosch, I am informed, has already voluntarily undertaken a perpetual oath of silence, so far as American publication is concerned. That is a pity, for he has great charm, his books are always beautifully printed, and occasionally his rhetoric yields to meaning. “No poet living has a sweeter line,” one is tempted to say, unless indeed it be Mr. Conrad Aiken in his new transformation; and although he



On the march and otherwise: Frederic Prokosch, E. E. Cummings, Conrad Aiken.

is plainly discouraging when he essays the grand manner—

And yet, O has the struggle really
a meaning?—

a sweet line is something in these far
from sweet days.

For Mr. Aiken it seems to be everything. The almost unanimous critical silence that greeted “And in the Human Heart” seems to have puzzled several persons, and certainly has provoked one of the editors of *The New Republic* to a moving defence of the work and its author, in the unusual shape of a review of the magazine's own review. The defense is that “No one living” etc., and, moreover, that Mr. Aiken knows how to make patterns with his vowels and consonants. Only a tone-deaf man could deny this; but it seems to me to have very little to do with the book as poetry, and nothing whatever to do with the silence that the book evoked. I have read this sonnet sequence several times, and carefully, and can report only that it is a Shakespeare-cum-Millay-cum-Hillyer pastiche of rhetoric,

with none of the force of Shakespeare, none of the freedom of Millay, and none of the grace of Hillyer. It is a set of extremely sterile exercises, performed with great technical ability—but Czerny nevertheless. And the fact that it is no pleasure to write in this way about the author of “Senlin” and “The Jig of Forslin” and “Preludes for Memnon” and “The Coming Forth by Day of Osiris Jones” suggests to me a possible reason for the book's neglect. When an experienced and admired leader commits an outright *gaffe*, a *lapsus* not only *calami* but *totius corporis*, the decent thing to do is to look away and shut up. I am sorry that I was not able to do so upon this occasion.

Mr. Cummings's “50 Poems” is a splendid example of marking time: no advance, no retreat, the same marvellous tricks and ribald twitches and occasional socking of the topmost bell.

I have always read him with a delight that this book does nothing to diminish; and if, as I suspect, my enthusiasm is largely undergraduate, it is nevertheless as inevitably a part of me as my excellently functioning patellar reflex. The reader who is anti-Cummings will not be converted by these poems; the non-partisan will emit “no sound of joy or sorrow”; the addict, like myself, will reach unblushingly for this hair of the dog that bit him twenty years ago, and hope for many many more of the same *in vitam venturi saeculi, Amen*.

SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 367)

VICTOR HUGO:
NOTRE DAME OF PARIS

This edifice raised by printing is colossal. . . . The whole human race is upon the scaffolding. . . . The most humble may stop a hole or place a stone. . . . It is a refuge promised to intelligence from another Deluge, against an overflow of barbarians.

Reappraisal and Prophecy

POEMS: 1930-1940. By Horace Gregory. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company. 1941. 163 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by LOUIS UNTERMEYER

BEGINNING with "Chelsea Rooming House" ten years ago, the three books of poetry published by Horace Gregory have had their admirers, even their imitators. Approved by the casual reviewers and applauded by the critically discriminating, Gregory has enjoyed neither acclaim for the way in which he has mastered his material nor credit for the power of his influence.

The publication of this volume, which assembles the contents of the three books with the addition of seventeen new poems, will be the signal for a new estimate. It will be—if I may be allowed a brief fling at prophecy—the occasion of a reappraisal which will finally establish Gregory's importance as creator and catalytic agent. A re-reading of "Chelsea Rooming House" will reveal that Gregory came at a time when the younger writers were bewildered by the confusion of tried responses and novel reactions, by a personal romanticism which they distrusted and a depersonalized realism which they disliked. They were equally divided in their allegiance to a traditional technique which promised a quick and common understanding, and experiments in "new" sensations—the logic of metaphor, the free play of the image, the substitution of allusion for statement—experiments which were all too likely to bring the dread charge of obscurity.

Gregory was one of the first to act affirmatively. His poetry met the problem by an acceptance of the dichotomy, and by fusing the contradictory elements. His technique is particularly interesting. Like Eliot, he is fond of the dissonant chord and unresolved suspense; like Hart Crane he crowds image upon image to increase sensation and suggest a new perspective. But he does not share Eliot's disillusion nor Crane's disorganization. There is constant control as well as positive belief in Gregory's poetry; his faith is a social faith. His method and manner created a new tone, half-ruminative, half-lyrical, superficially disruptive yet somehow integrated. "Chelsea Rooming House" is a sort of "Spoon River" set down in lower Manhattan; but whereas the tone of Masters' book is classic-elegiac, Gregory's is tough and complex, violent and contemporary.

More than ever Gregory attains an expression which is closely packed yet not dense, highly imaginative without becoming fantastic. His intensity sometimes disturbs continuity, but (the poet might well insist) so does modern life. Dogmas about form and content have been as rudely shaken as our conceptions of time and space. Poems like those in "No Retreat" and "Chorus for Survival" (significant titles) take cognizance of these rapid changes in conception. They cannot be read as straight narratives, for they indulge in a freedom of form and effect: they employ the montage of the cinema, the interrupting voice of the quick-changing telephone dial, the summoned stations of the air with finger-tip control. Gregory's poems retain the sudden shifts of mood and tense, of sentiment and anti-poetic fact, of poignant nostalgia and objective contemplation. By the very juxtaposition of elliptical statement and powerful suggestion, they create

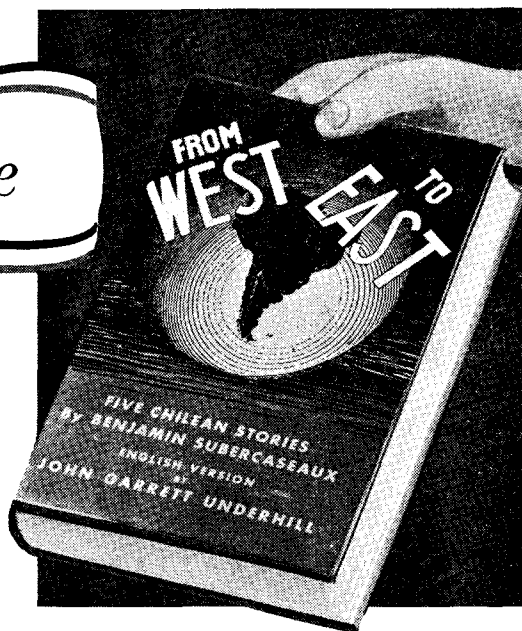
characters and dreams of the immediate present. The new "Monologues from The Passion of M'Phail" are the maturest examples of Gregory's method; they present the living moment as though it were already a part of history. Completing the earlier verse and giving it a growing design, they reflect "the forces of the past focussed upon the present."

I began by saying that the book is important; I should end by saying it is exciting. Putting aside the yardstick of the appraiser and once more assuming the robe of the crystal-gazer, I predict that this volume will be awarded this year's Pulitzer for Poetry. I predict, moreover, that it will be an easy winner.

Readers not yet familiar with New Directions's *Poet of the Month* booklets may do well to make their first acquaintance by way of a brief selection from John Donne: "Some Poems and a Devotion." This volume includes the passage, from the too-little-known "Devotions and Death's Duel," about the tolling bell, from which Hemingway's title was taken.

From Chile

...has come a book
that will open your
eyes to the cultural
riches of our South
American neighbor.



FROM WEST TO EAST

5 CHILEAN STORIES BY
**Benjamin
Subercaseaux**

ENGLISH VERSION BY
**JOHN GARRETT
UNDERHILL**

These superb tales from the pen of one of Chile's leading writers will expand your literary horizon ... will reveal how and why our neighbors to the South must be reckoned a potent force in modern literature. The *N. Y. Herald Tribune "Books"* says: "There is a robust and virile quality to the work which may be a distant legacy from the Araucanas, whom the Spaniards were almost unable to quell during the conquest. Subercaseaux employs a wry, grotesque humor ... exquisite descriptions ... tense and mounting horror worthy of Poe. Mr. Underhill has made an excellent translation of this rich and polished prose." At all bookstores. \$2.00. PUTNAM