

Puppet Under Tyrant

BEND SINISTER. By Vladimir Nabokov. New York: Henry Holt & Co. 1947. 242 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by NATHAN L. ROTHMAN

MR. NABOKOV is a writer of tremendous technical powers, and it goes almost without saying that the actual plot of the book at hand is its least important part. We can come to that in a moment. Nabokov has mastered every kind of virtuosity that has been developed in this century. Naturally he owes a great deal to Joyce; it is there to be seen in the asides and the several (and simultaneous) depths of consciousness, in the bardic phrases, in the incessant literary recalls (which is all right here since the hero, Adam Krug, is a university professor).

And there is, of course, the final definitive signature — a conscious tribute to the master, I should say — when Nabokov stops his narrative cold, to insert a long and fanciful dialogue on Shakespeare and "Hamlet," as Joyce did in "Ulysses." I do not, of course, speak of imitation. This is a matter of proceeding from the source. Nabokov is an artist in his own right, entirely and easily at home in the worlds of the conscious and the subconscious, lighting them with a display of literary fireworks that must delight every literate reader.

He is not Joyce's equal, and does not need to be, but there is no harm in pointing out that "Ulysses" contained also, behind its fireworks and within its intricacies, a spirit in profound agony. I miss the spirit in Nabokov's book, particularly in view of its announced program: a novel of man under the tyrant state. Krug is the man: a stalwart anarchist throwing his weight about uncompromisingly within a parental state. He is unconcerned, he is contemptuous, he is foolhardy. He knew Paduk, the dictator, when they were schoolmates, and regards him still as the repulsive toad he was then. Krug's thoughts, his involved and highly expressive mental life, are the only commentary upon Paduk and his fascist regime (in this nameless country, with its very language created by Nabokov for the occasion). This is the book: Krug against the state.

It is a drama we know only too well. And, as we read it here it seems somehow desiccated, fleshless, a distant clash remembered and echoed in contempt. Or, to suggest another analogy, it seems to have receded too deeply into too remote, if meticulously formed, an image. The thing

has the dimensions of a fantasy seen through the small end of a telescope. Krug, the observer, is real, but not Paduk, not his minions, not his crimes and his victims, not the whole panorama of his evil state. Not even Krug's bereavements, his tears, his fears. There is the shadow of a fear, and the echo of an outcry—but it is

all in the disembodied and fathomless memory of the beholder Krug. And when Nabokov himself steps in deliberately at the end, like the puppet-master, and draws up his strings and removes Krug, why then the disillusion is complete. Brilliant, brilliant, but after all it was not real, he was not hurt, we need not be concerned, there is the puppet hanging, and here is the master himself, large as life, smiling at us.

It Can Happen Here

SENECA, U. S. A. By John Roeburt. New York: Samuel Curl, Inc. 1947. 255 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ARTHUR C. FIELDS

APPPEARING as a dangerous menace to a world already exhausted from past conflicts, anti-Semitism leaves a bitter taste in the mouth; it reminds us that there is no resting place on the road to peace; it is a living proof justifying the total destruction of any element of hatred existing anywhere in our world today. The thought of thousands of starving children wandering through a Europe which has not yet forgotten the stigma attached to the Star of David is certainly not pleasant to contemplate. Nor are the pleas of a people fighting for their very lives easy to ignore. No, anti-Semitism isn't funny, and therefore when a book appears that regards it as good copy—a "sure bet" for public consumption—something ought to be done about it.

Hailed in advance comment as a "striking contribution to the struggle against the virus of native fascism," "Seneca, U. S. A." probes dutifully into the infectious soul of the "hate racket." It tells the inside story of the birth and growth of an organization known as the "Jesocrats," an organization run by Victor, a hunchback movie attendant, who writes long essays on how "The Jew Debases Us." Gathering his crowd of sympathizers, Victor declares war on Milton Kahn, a Jew who "believed almost fanatically in assimilation; [who] bitterly assailed the professional hierarchs who held Jews together as Jews for their own profit and pleasure." Through Victor's instigation, Milton Kahn and his entire family are wiped out, leaving justice to Shep Ward, the managing editor of the *Seneca Leader*.

Shep, as the main exponent of honor in the story, is a singularly over-complicated individual. Torn between the hateful policies of his murdered em-

ployer and a growing dissatisfaction with himself, he blunders on stubbornly through the book until he finally decides to expose this subversive group through the public press. By that time, most of the characters have sprouted out like so many garden weeds and the reader is justifiably suspicious that Seneca can ever be put to rights again.

At first glance, there seems to be nothing wrong with this as another crusade against anti-Semitism. But that is just the point: it is just a first glance, a convenient substitution of anti-Semitism for "Complication" in the plot structure. A cursory treatment of a vital world problem, introduced to flavor the writing with a pinch of social significance, is, in this reviewer's opinion, an usurpation of literary license. "Seneca, U. S. A." exploits anti-Semitism as popular plot material. Let's hope that in the future writers will spare their readers the shame of literary prostitution.

LOWELL THOMAS

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Curious, Furious Personality

THE SHORTER POEMS OF WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR. *Selected and Edited by J. B. Sidgwick.* New York: The Macmillan Co. 1947. 86 pp. \$1.75.

Reviewed by LEONARD BACON

IN HIS judgmatical introduction to this brief selection of Landor's shorter poems Mr. Sidgwick manages to tell us a good deal about the curious, furious personality whose most celebrated poems are, paradoxically, the last word in exquisite strictness, proportion, and orderly perfection. For most of his eighty-nine years Landor was at war with single spies or with battalions. He fought with schoolmasters, his Oxford pastors and masters, his father, his wife, his children, the law, and, of course, with lawyers. It was early observed that few men had a more appropriate middle name. A lady, Mr. Sidgwick tells us, complained that the pleasure of his company was greatly impaired by his passion for knocking people down. And a person who thumped a bag of sovereigns on a table in a law court, exclaiming loudly that he understood justice was for sale there and that he should like to buy some, must have had a perverse interest in hot water for its own sake. Yet that part of his poetry which men will not willingly let die makes us think of the quiet and the luminous, of what has been called "the grace of stillness." The cliché holds good; not many poets have made so few words do so much. Nor was the chisel ever used to better purpose. It is not wonderful if men compare his lyrics with Ben Jonson's or that dozens of his aftercomers have labored in vain to acquire that "perfected touch."

Yet Mr. Sidgwick is quite right to point out Landor's strange unevenness. Dozens of his poems misfire, and in fact a number in this little book scarcely rise above doggerel and have only historical interest if they have that. It is noticeable that the points of many of the polemic epigrams have rusted away. Even cracks about verses "Languider than Lamartine's" or the hypnagogic effect of "Wordsworth's low coo" have lost their original tartness.

The reviewer thinks that Mr. Sidgwick might well have included many poems whose absence is almost shocking. Where are the noble lines to Robert Browning, as fine a compliment as one great poet ever paid another? Every other page of "Pericles and Aspasia" has incidental music, often at Landor's best and almost always better than some of the work to be found in this collection. One

wonders on what principle "On Goethe's Epigrams," "A Back-Biter," "A Poet Sleeping" were chosen. Perhaps Mr. Sidgwick thinks we ought to catch Homer nodding now and then.

At any rate Mr. Sidgwick loves Landor and regrets that so few nowadays know him. If his anxieties are justified, then the creatures deserve it.

For not to have grown aware of that delicate grandeur is its own pitiful reward. But what of it? For, as the old essayist would have put it, a couple of millennia hence, when English is what Sanskrit is today, beyond much doubt the eye of some student will lighten as, with a flash of intuition, he becomes conscious of passionate simplicity burning in every syllable of:

Mother. I cannot mind my wheel.

Demure Singing Mouse

LOVE POEMS. *By George Barker.* New York: The Dial Press. 1947. 79 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by DUDLEY FITTS

ONE of the most successful poems in this book is an untitled quatrain which might well be called "Variations on a Verse of Horace":

Striking my root and pinnacle
asunder,
My mountain and my tree,
Love, like a lightning hammer of
thunder
Sets my singing mouse free.

I call this successful because it is witty, because it is well ordered (e.g., the chiasmus in the first two lines), because nothing is wasted, and because that demure singing mouse enforces just the right amount of sly humility by evoking the *ridiculus mus* of the original. Moreover, it might with perfect propriety serve as epigraph for these love poems, for it is strange enough, in its quasi-epic way, to suggest the extreme strangeness of the longer poems. Mr. Barker has never been noted for his control; his motto is from Petronius: "the free spirit must be hurled headlong"; but if one keeps in mind the mouse, and the manner of its birth,

one may not go wholly under in the fury that storms through these pages.

The most impressive section of the book is composed of four cycles of love poems, some speaking through the woman's voice, the majority through the man's. It is difficult to discuss these poems without the extended quotation for which I have no space, but it may be said that the technique is surrealist-metaphysical: the violent hurling together of unpredictable images whose symbolic value seems often hopelessly private. When these images cohere, true poetic excitement is generated: "My joy, my jockey, my Gabriel/Who bares his horns above my sleep/Is sleeping now"; or "The forked lightning, kicking/Its gold legs across the sky, /Tell you how once, between my knees/Fighting, you rose to die." Both of these passages are admirable; indeed, the second of them, with the brilliant and open imagery of the first two lines and the epigrammatic explosion set off by the pun upon the verb "die," is a minor triumph.

But when I encounter "Nightly to his archipelagoes where/Apples adorn the pillar, /My kiss of fishes moves in schools and bears/The body to him on a silver platter," I fear that I have lost the trail of the mouse and am astray in a great resonance. And that is not wholly unpleasant, either, for I prefer the least controlled resonances of Mr. Barker to the sterile piddling of so many of the younger poets: toy-makers, precious craftsmen,—*ridiculi mures*, in short. Yet it would be well, since Mr. Barker is obviously not a toy-maker, if he were to discard certain playthings: the too surprising distortion of language, the quaintness too arch ("The giddygoat and Cupid chase/All but Disney from the place"), all the bizarre paraphernalia which were better left to the use of a Kenneth Patchen or a Gil Orlovitz. He is too valuable a poet to be spending so much time in the nursery.

