

deed, there is a genial air of shoving him out of the way as if he were not very important.

Such physical action as the story has centers in a jazz musician named Lonnie, focal point of Ada's complicated sympathies, whose involvement in a gangster plot leads to the killing of Stephen Bright and a Negro musician named Tucker. Lonnie borrows money from Ada, which her spirited sister demands he return, and is about to flee Chicago when the Army drafts him. He is the center and symbol of the neurotic, feckless night life of a great metropolis. His two assets are music and charm.

There is a variety of other characters—a Dr. Gregg, who is also infected by the general *malaise*; a friend of Snow's, one Ralph Johns, a free-living fellow in the newspaper world, whose internal climate is evident from the way he is introduced: "Anything to get away from a worried preoccupation about his own plans"; a saloon keeper named Fats; political bosses; persons from South State Street; a literary agent more or less cartooned; and many more. There must be as many persons in "Somewhere the Tempest Fell" as there are in "Vanity Fair."

Miss Herbst is a writer of power. By this I mean she has an instinctive capacity for conveying imaginative energy. Her invention is inexhaustible; and she crowds into her pages with careless abundance enough personages to stock three or four ordinary books. And each of these characters interests her—interests her, upon presentation, to the exclusion of everybody else. The novel begins by examining the life and personality of Adam Snow, and one thinks he is to be focal to the structure of the tale. But by and by Mrs. Brady, Ada's mother, receives the same devoted attention; and after her, Henry Rodney, whose relations with various women are traced with care; and after that, we concentrate upon Ada and then, through Adam, we see a variety of other persons, and so on indefinitely, so that one cares less and less about the private woes of the original formal hero and returns to them, from time to time, under compulsion and with a kind of disturbed surprise, as if one were under moral obligation to come back to him. Because these later persons crowd him off the boards, he grows thinner and less convincing, until at length he is a mere *papier mâché* parent, the stereotype American father intervening between wife and daughter on behalf of the daughter.

Miss Herbst is not only prolific of character, she also has an encyclo-

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Poetry.

The books reviewed below suggest various questions in regard to poetry. One is the problem of communicating to the layman the nature of a poem and the function of a poet. Another is the impact of a modern ideology upon the poetic process, as contrasted with the influence upon poetry of revealed religion. Finally, there is the problem, as apparently represented in the poems of Mrs. Pierce, of how much poetry may be restricted within the limits of a philosophy. It might be said, in general, that the thinking of poets is rarely, and by the nature of the medium cannot be, organized thinking. Emotional, passionate, intuitive is the poetic inspiration, in which the unconscious plays a large role. To be sure, the eighteenth century attempted to reduce poetry to formula, without success. Any modern movement to reduce it to logic or polemic will also fail. It reflects, but only as in lightning flashes can interpret, the time.

"Why Are We So Excited?"

THE POETIC IMAGE. By Cecil Day Lewis. New York: Oxford University Press. 1947. 157 pp. \$2.50.

NOAH AND THE WATERS. By Cecil Day Lewis. Forest Hills, L. I.: Transatlantic Arts, Inc. 1947. 59 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by DAVID DAICHES

"THE POETIC AGE" is the record of Day Lewis's reflections on the nature and function of the image in poetry addressed to an audience about whose education and sophistication he appears uncertain. I describe the book as the record of his reflections rather than the outcome of them, because he seems to be thinking the matter through as he writes rather than expounding a point of view he had clearly developed before he put pen to paper. This has unfortunate effects on his manner of writing. For

example, we get a paragraph opening thus:

We begin to see, then, that the poetic image is a more or less sensuous picture in words, to some degree metaphorical, with an undertone of some human emotion in its context, but also charged with and releasing into the reader a special emotion or passion which—no, it won't do, the thing has got out of hand. So let us start again and ask ourselves a simple question: Why are we so excited by metaphor and simile?

This coy and conscious amateurism is all the more surprising in a writer who is himself a poet. It is presumably intended to reassure the reader, to give him the impression of arguing the thing out with the writer on a non-technical, commonsense basis. But the common reader is surely only too willing to listen to an expert talk on his own subject and is irritated by such attempts to jolly him along. Sometimes Mr. Lewis seems to be shouting commonplaces to a slightly deaf child: "I would distinguish, in fact, between human emotion and poetic passion. Does that seem a very obvious distinction? It ought to be. . . ." Or again: "That common factor—let us be rash, and burn our boats, and call it pleasure."

As the book progresses, Mr. Lewis seems to forget the necessity of alternately shouting at and talking down to the reader, and the discussion settles down at last into an interesting but rather fragmentary set of *aperçus* about poetry. But it remains difficult to follow a line through the book, or to isolate and discuss the writer's view of the poetic image. We do discover that he regards the image as the essence of poetry and that when he tries to discover the nature of the poetic image he is also trying to discover the nature of poetry.



Cecil Day Lewis "seems to be shouting commonplaces to a slightly deaf child."

We note, too, that he has some shrewd insights into particular poems and has some most interesting remarks on Dylan Thomas's "After the Funeral" and some other modern poems. He deserves praise, also, for putting that influential but silly man T. E. Hulme in his place as a critic. But having read the book we put it down with a distinct feeling of disappointment; much of it seems to have evaporated by the time we have finished it. We remember a few good points about individual poems, a questionable differentiation between the way images work in modern poetry and the way they worked in previous ages, and beyond that have only a vague recollection of remarks about organization and pleasure and universality and significance with which we are not disposed to quarrel but which we hardly need a poet to tell us.

From any ordinary critic, "The Poetic Image" would have been accepted as a commendable attempt to think through some basic facts about poetry: from Day Lewis it is not good enough.

As though to remind us that Mr. Lewis is himself a poet Transatlantic Arts have just brought out the first American edition of "Noah and the Waters," a latter-day morality play which appeared in England in 1936. The rather simple, rhetorical quality of left-wing allegory of the Popular-Front days sounds just a little pathetic after the Second World War, but the play does illustrate a use of imagery, both rhetorical and allegorical, which Mr. Lewis the poet has now left behind and which Mr. Lewis the critic does not discuss. There was much talk in the 1930's of the function of the poet. Mr. Lewis is now concerned only with the function of poetry. But surely they are both aspects of the same question.

A Single Idea—A Moralistic Pattern

I SING OF A MAIDEN (*The Mary Book of Verse*). Edited by Sister M. Thérèse. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1947. 459 pp. \$4.50.

THEREFORE CHOOSE LIFE. By Edith Lovejoy Pierce. New York: Harper & Bros. 1947. 76 pp. \$1.75.

Reviewed by A. M. SULLIVAN

THE FASCINATING discovery in this anthology is the appeal of the Virgin Mary to a wide frontier of poets of all religious complexions; to the agnostic, the apostate, the sophisticate, and the convert. Sister Thérèse has searched with reasonable diligence into the sources, and despite the danger that hangs over the anthology that is limited to a single idea, she has given us variety along with good poetry.

The plan of her book presents the Virgin in prophecy with selections from the Old Testament, the poetic evolution of the Virgin symbol in the early Christian Church, the delightful Mary-songs of the medieval period, the devotional and mystical poems of the Elizabethan recusants, the poems of the nineteenth-century Protestant romantics, and a generous array of the moderns who find spiritual pleasure in a symbol which represents the ennoblement of woman.

Sister M. Thérèse, being a poet, chose wisely among the poems and hymns, eschewing the pietistic. There is considerable rise and fall in the quality of the moderns but nearly all of the later poets have found an original facet on a many-faceted subject. It may seem strange to encounter a poem of Rainer Maria Rilke here, but Rilke was a devout Catholic in youth, despite his later days of devotion to the

"rebel angels." Both Eliot and Auden are here, both spiraling out of agnosticism toward a Christian belief. We meet Dorothy Parker in a reverent mood.

The most arresting poem by a modern is Henry Adams's "Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres." The poem contains the "Prayer to the Dynamo," written forty years ago which concludes:

Seize then, the atom. Rack his joints.
Tear out of him his secret spring.
Grind him to nothing,—though he points
To us, and his life blood anoints
Me,—the dead Atom-King.

Adams restates the quarrel of science and faith, which raged at the turn of the century, and then tells the Virgin Mary:

Waiting I feel the energy of faith
Not in the future science, but in you.

If I have ignored the native Catholic poet represented here, Sister Thérèse can share the blame, partly because we are excited by the sustained high quality of the non-Catholic bard and the fact that we expect a high level of performance by the Catholic poet, a promise that is not always kept, although there are memorable poems by the coterie of Catholic poets who are frequently encountered in *Spirit*, a Catholic magazine of verse. Cornelia Otis Skinner gives us an interesting clue to the non-Catholic interest in the Blessed Virgin in "To the Sistine Madonna":

Mary, most serenely fair
Hear an unbeliever's prayer.
Nurtured in an austere creed
Sweetest Lady, she has need
Of the solace of thy grace;
See the tears that stain her face
As she kneels to beg your love,
You whom no one told her of.

The poems of Edith Lovejoy Pierce reveal a disciplined poetic talent. Her themes are wholesome, and at times break through a moralistic pattern. She never writes badly, but there is almost always the philosophic link to a premise which must be demonstrated and proven. Occasionally she breaks away from the stricture of the theme, and gives her imagination and emotion free rein as in "The White Stallion" that

Plunges into the straight air
And, high above tree and roof,
Stamps on the night sky,
Striking stars from his hoof.

A typical descriptive poem in the book is "Water Lily," in which the idea is carefully depicted and sustained without damage to the poetry. When the poet abandons a calculation of theme she is at her best.

W. H. Auden

By Howard Griffin

A MAN with the wry face of a twisted saint enters the shabby doorway at a dash as if by his least gesture and his gait he said, *Use time*.—A smile half-clowned, a gaze perceptive as a dog's announce him sharply to the waiting class,—these and his battered army togs. —But when he speaks thoughts move with strange address and as one listens (*in the chalky air*), unserved, a book turns luminous, suspended in the ether, as it were . . . Garbled and magical the words that have the desperate charity of a whip. Habitually alone he seems to move through the deft fabric of a game,—observe in the eye the dark unspoken thought and in the thought the spirit's truthful flame.