

Poetry. *So much of poetry today illustrates a philosophic or despairing attitude toward human destiny that it is a relief to find three new volumes of verse concerned with the elemental and changeless aspects of nature. Theodore Roethke, lyric poet and naturalist, finds magic and sentience in the humblest vegetable and exquisite flower in his "The Lost Son and Other Poems." Thomas Merton's "Figures for an Apocalypse" is the arresting work of a young Trappist monk who has taken the vow of perpetual silence. He defends with authority and humility the ascetic life and writes of nature with the awareness of the agrarian attached to the fertile soil. In another mood Laurie Lee, a new English poet, contemplates the seasons, the wind, the rain, and the landscapes of England. His "The Bloom of Candles" contains twelve poems of originality and artistry.*

Vigorous Swimmer in the Poetic Stream

"THE DISPOSSESSED. By John Berryman. New York: William Sloane Assoc. 1948. 103 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GERARD PREVIN MEYER

JOHN BERRYMAN, in his first full-length volume of poetry, turns out to be one of the more vigorous swimmers in the poetic stream. In "The Dispossessed" he displays a talent and drive strong enough to breast the currents of our time, not seldom rising on the crests because of an uncommon sense of form.

Despite a growing reputation for acerbity in the field of criticism, Mr. Berryman's range as a poet extends beyond Swift's "savage indignation" to such sterling and delicate qualities as sympathy, directness, and sincerity; he can be powerful in several directions. As to those of his poems—particularly the later ones—which make their patterns like kaleidoscopes out of fragments of varying tone thrown together in seeming wilfulness—well, this reviewer "thought, and thought, and thought about it," and came up with this not-exactly-deathless quatrain:

In careful form the formless sits
Impassive, though the reader quits;
For, if the reader fits the norm,
He formless is without the form.

In his earlier poems, Berryman appears to be working his way through Yeats, Villon, Landor, Eliot, Auden, Hopkins, Rimbaud, and even Cummings (that neglected prophet); but most of all through Yeats. But Berryman, unlike some other "learned" poets, works through his own life and ours as well. Such poems as "The Statue," "A Point of Age," "The Traveller," and "The Ball Poem," for instance, appear in the main to deal with the universal personal feeling of

aloneness and its concomitant need for all-one-ness. Later in this volume, "Parting as Descent" freezes a particularly painful experience in a highly effective short piece. "Letter to His Brother," a poem full of the terror and despair of our time, reminds us that, by and large, Berryman's poetry is somber. But just as one has come to believe that he has little commerce with joy, a successful love poem like "Canto Amor," with its fine lines—"descend (my soul) out of dismantling storm, into the darkness where the world is made. . . . Come back to the bright air. Love is multiform"—rejoices, and we rejoice with the poet.

Other poems would stand out as individual and memorable in any collection: "Cloud and Flame," "The Possessed," "Travelling South," "White Feather," and—among the more complex—"A Winter-Piece to a Friend Away." This last-named probably baffles



John Berryman "rings terrible and true."

flashes paraphrase (as all good poetry should), but rings terrible and true. I venture to say that it will remind the reader of no other poem; it left me shaken.

Exciting, Low Voices

FIGURES FOR AN APOCALYPSE. By Thomas Merton. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1948. 111 pp. \$2.50.

THE LOST SON AND OTHER POEMS. By Theodore Roethke. New York: Doubleday & Co. 1948. 64 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HOWARD GRIFFIN

IN the first of these volumes an exciting young voice speaks out—a voice humble yet authoritative which communicates ideas that are simple and important. So arresting are these poems that I was driven back to investigate the earlier work of Thomas Merton, a book called "A Man in the Divided Sea"—and that in itself is good evidence of the effect of his writing. The restrained, intense voice here is that of a Trappist monk who, along with the vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, stability, and conversion of manners, has taken the pledge of perpetual silence—an extraordinary paradox itself eloquent of the nature of this world. In "The Poet, to His Book," one of the few personal poems, this irony touches the author himself resulting in an effort to motivate and justify estheticism by religious evangelism of a moderate sort. For the evangelism, if one can call it that, of the third part of "Figures for An Apocalypse," although never blatant, lurks implicit and shows itself particularly in the revealing "Song of the Traveller" where the poet speaks of the "cities full of sorcery," from which one deduces he regards that "sorcery" as not wholly black.

Exhortatory both of himself and others, Thomas Merton writes many lines of a biting felicity and of great conviction. Less rousing but perhaps more effective in a quiet way are those lyrics that from contemplation of an external phase of nature move onward to an unhurried consideration of ultimates ("Landscape: Wheatfields," for instance). Since the Trappists are among other things scientific farmers, it is natural that agrarian matters—presented from a transcendental point of view—should play a large part in these pages. Awareness of a field, of an insect, of harvest is fixed at a moment of wild sincerity and sweeping passion.

It helps us to understand these
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Seeing Things

THE MAN WHO WAS LAMB

THE portion of the earth that Charles Lamb loved best was not green. He preferred cobblestones to grass any day. He was a city man if ever there was one; a cockney in every inch of his small person. The nightingale never released a song so sweet to his ears as the sound of Bow Bells. Had he been compelled to choose between Skiddaw and Soho, Wordsworth's mountain would have had no chance. The pleasure William found in a daffodil, Charles derived from a chimney-sweep.

He did not object to nature—for others. But human nature and the hum of city streets were his delight. Although, with Mary, he liked to venture into the countryside, for a while and as a break, even in the country he was a cockney on vacation. He dared to write to Wordsworth, of all people, "Separate from the pleasure of your company, I don't much care if I never see a mountain in my life." Nature to him was "dead"; London, living. The sun and the moon of the Lake District did not shine for him as brightly as the lamps of London. It was not the beauties of the outdoors which he found "ever fresh and green and warm," but all the inventions and assemblies of men in the congested boroughs by the Thames.

Few writers have described a city more affectionately than Charles his London. Few have outdone him in making strangers, both by the calendar and geography, feel like citizens of vanished times and places. There were scarcely any aspects of the metropolis he did not cherish. He, to whom much of life was denied, often shed tears of joy on his night-walks about London at encountering so much life.

He never tired of the lighted shops of the Strand and Fleet Street; of the innumerable trades, tradesmen, customers, coaches, crowds, wagons, and playhouses; of "all the bustle and wickedness round about Covent Garden, the very women of the Town, the Watchmen, drunken scenes, rattles"; of the city's pungent smells and very dirt and mud; of the sun shining upon houses and pavements; or of the print shops, the old book stalls, and the coffee houses. He rejoiced in the sense they gave him of London being a pantomime and a

masquerade where life itself was at last awake. The city for him was at once a stimulant and an escape. Urbanwise, he lived on it no less than in it. He measured his fortune, good or ill, by his distance from the Strand. He was jubilant when, after one of their frequent changes of address, he found that the house in which he and Mary were then stopping was "forty-two inches nearer town."

The city he lived in, though a metropolis, was not for him a capital. Its government was an irrelevance; its politics nonexistent. An historian, hoping to find in Lamb's essays or letters some reflection of the great events of turbulent years, would be hard put to determine whether history had bypassed Lamb or he history. He lived through England's wars as if Europe were at peace. So far as he was concerned, they were undeclared and unwaged. He came to admire Nelson, admitted Wellington's existence, had no love for the early Hanovers, in a mild way championed Queen Caroline's cause, and was curious about Napoleon's height. But the French Revolution left no visible mark upon him, and, though he must have heard of Trafalgar, Austerlitz, and Waterloo, we never hear of them through him.

Did the younger Pitt die in 1806? For Lamb he never seems to have lived. Did "Buoney" threaten England with invasion? Did the Peterloo Massacre spill blood in Manchester?



Charles Lamb—"with his 'heart against this thorn of a desk'."

Were trade unions allowed for the first time? Did the Prince Regent's marriage to Mrs. Fitzherbert rock society? Were both the Roman Catholic Emancipation and the First Reform Bill passed? Contemporaneous as he was with all of these occurrences, Lamb was apparently the contemporary of none of them.

Unlike such of his intimates as Coleridge, Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, and Wordsworth, he had no interest in public affairs. Society for him was always a circle of friends and never the collective well-being of a community. "Public affairs—except as they touch upon me, and so turn into private," Lamb wrote to Thomas Manning, "I cannot whip up my mind to feel any interest in." By his own admission, he was deaf to the noises which kept Europe awake, and could not make present times present to him.

HE was as insulated against pontifical events as he was susceptible to human, literary, and gastronomic values. In his scheme of things "important people" were unimportant, and for him the "Great World" possessed no fascination. The bearers of titles, more than leaving him unimpressed, left him unamused no less surely than official leaders left him unled. A benevolent eccentric himself, he delighted in the benevolent eccentricities of others. The heads he prized were not those highly placed but those "with some diverting twist in them"; heads lightened by "out of the way humors and opinions."

His absorptions were personal, not public, and small-scaled rather than outsized. Covent Garden was his Buckingham Palace; the art galleries, his House of Commons; the book stalls, his House of Lords. Londoner, utter and complete, though he was, Lamb never felt, thought, or wrote as a citizen but always as an individual. He took the same pleasure in the "delicious juices of meats and fishes, and society, and the cheerful glass, and candle-light and fireside conversations, and innocent vanities and jests, and irony itself," that he did in the passages, sublime or melancholy, of his favorite old authors. If the oddities of authorship were dear to him, so were the oddities of people and places, and it was these which enchanted him in London.

The London through which Lamb trudged was apt to be two cities—the one he saw as a man, and the other he remembered from his youth. Accordingly, even when solitary, he seldom walked the streets alone. For the author whose attachment to the past was so great that he could ex-