

contemporary poetry. We recognize in Walter Benton's big periods and apparently amorphous combinations of syllables and cadences the huge, equivocal horizons that confront us in other fields. This sensual poetry, strewn all over the page, as it were, has a way of giving the reader a sense of utter formlessness and then it suddenly stiffens and clarifies, and we become aware of the evolution of poetic speech. Something direct and sharp is here. The tremendous act of creation is before us, and at times the very energy of the writer seems to destroy the thing created. But at other

junctures, in the best work in this book, the selle is not o'er leapt and a complete and beautiful poem emerges, such as the two I have cited. And as all good poems must be, they are unique, but also they exist in relation to the English language and in fulfillment of the aims of poetry, which are visual, auditory, and human. Walter Benton says:

I can think of no moral . . . no prophecy to tell you.
I am a poet.

And of the truth of this declaration there can be no question.

Two Poems

By Robinson Jeffers

What Of It?

LIFE'S norm is lost: no doubt it is put away with Plato's
Weights and measures in the deep mind of God,
To find reincarnation after due time and their own deformities
Have killed the monsters: but for this moment
The monsters possess the world. Look: forty thousand men's labor and a
navy of ships, to spring a squib
Over Bikini lagoon.

Nobler than man or beast my sea-mountains
Pillar the cloud-sky; the beautiful waters in the deep gorges,
Ventana Creek and the Sur Rivers, Mal Paso Creek, Soberanes, Garapatas,
Palo Colorado,
Flow, and the sacred hawks and the storms go over them. Man's fate is like
Eastern fables, startling and dull,
The Thousand and One Nights, or the jabber of delirium:—what of it? What
is not well? Man is not well? What of it?
He has had too many doctors, leaders and saviors: let him alone. It may be
that bitter nature will cure him.

Original Sin

The man-brained and man-handed ground-ape, physically
The most repulsive of all hot-blooded animals
Up to that time of the world: they had dug a pitfall
And caught a mammoth, but how could their sticks and stones
Reach the life in that hide? They danced around the pit, shrieking
With ape excitement, flinging sharp flints in vain, and the stench of their bodies
Stained the white air of dawn; but presently one of them
Remembered the yellow dancer, wood-eating fire
That guards the cave-mouth: he ran and fetched him, and others
Gathered sticks at the wood's edge; they made a blaze
And pushed it into the pit, and they fed it high, around the mired sides
Of their huge prey. They watched the long hairy trunk
Waver over the stiffling trumpeting pain,
And they were happy.

Meanwhile the intense color and nobility of sunrise,
Rose and gold and amber flowed up the sky. Wet rocks were shining, a little
wind
Stirred the leaves of the forest and the marsh flag-flowers; the soft valley
between the low hills
Became as beautiful as the sky; while in its midst, hour after hour, the happy
hunters
Roasted their living meat slowly to death.

This is the human dawn. As for me, I would rather
Be a worm in a wild apple than a son of man.
But we are what we are, and we might remember
Not to hate any person, for all are vicious;
And not be astonished at any evil, all are deserved;
And not fear death, it is the only way to be cleansed.

These are the people.

Mystic & Matchmaker

LIFE OF THE VIRGIN MARY. By Rainer Maria Rilke. Translated by C. F. MacIntyre. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1947. 55 pp. \$2.50.

SELECTED POEMS. By Bertolt Brecht. Translated by H. R. Hays. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock. 1947. 179 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by GUSTAV DAVIDSON

IT IS difficult to imagine two German poets who present greater contrasts in outlook, content, and style than Rainer Maria Rilke and Bertolt Brecht, particularly as they reveal themselves in the two volumes under consideration—Rilke's "Life of the Virgin Mary," a cycle of thirteen lyrics composed in 1900, and Brecht's "Selected Poems," a 179-page assemblage of songs, ballads, and dramatic excerpts written during the war years. Both books contain the original German with the English equivalents on facing pages.

Rilke, dead these twenty years, is still the "unseizable" mystic yearning for ultimate revelation. His poetry embraces "all the struggles, acceptances, compromises, and surrenders of mankind." Brecht, a political exile who has made his home in California since 1941, is the voice of social protest, the "apostle of reaction against individualism," the Marxist matchmaker who has joined literature and politics in a union which, despite all the blessings of fellow travelers, has proved incompatible.

Some eight or nine years back, Alfred Perles declared that "any attempt at translating Rilke is an arrogance, almost an obscenity." Yet translations have continued without letup, most of them bearing out Perles's admonition. The exception is C. F. MacIntyre. He has managed to avoid the pitfalls of both the apologist and the idolator. He has conveyed the essentiality of Rilke, his limitless light, his questing spirit, his Orphic song. In the present instance MacIntyre has, in addition, resurrected a group of poems about which, curiously enough, almost nothing has been heard this side of the Atlantic. These "Marienleben" lyrics, composed to illustrate sketches by one Heinrich Vöglger, first appeared in Leipzig in 1913 over the Insel-Verlag imprint. There have been no previous versions published in America. In 1922 an English metrical translation by G. L. Barrett was brought out in Wurzburg.

Mr. MacIntyre, being a poet himself and a scholar equally fluent in German and English, is ideally suited

to re-create in our own tongue the work of that "inimitable sculptor of words." And in the transition hardly any loss has been suffered in rhythm, color, and *geist* of the original. Especially in the "Pietà," in "Of the Wedding at Cana," in "Consolation of Mary with the Resurrected Christ," and in "Of the Death of Mary" does the translator preserve the delicate outstreamings and innominate reaches of that haunted wanderer in the no-man's land of incantation and reality. In the present work Rilke reflects his obsession with religious subjects, an obsession he never shook off and which, coming to early flower in his "Book of Hours," was carried over into his last great sequence, "Duino Elegies." Occasionally MacIntyre nods, as in his recasting of:

*Eine Nachbarin kam und klugte
und wusste nicht wie, und der
Alte, vorsichtig, ging und verhielt
das Gemuhe/einer dunkelen Kuh.
Denn so war es noch nie.*

into:

A neighbor came and played wise
but didn't know how./The old man
went and stopped the dark cow's
mooring,/thoughtfully. Such a night
never was till now.

It might be argued that Rilke himself was not too felicitous in the original. But how faithful and final are MacIntyre's renderings elsewhere, as in his recasting of these lines from "Consolation of Mary":

*Und sie begannen
still wie die Bäume im Frühling,
unendlich zugleich,
diese Jahreszeit
ihres äussersten Umgangs.*

into:

And they began,
silently as trees in spring,
infinitely together,
this season of their uttermost communion.

In the case of Brecht's "Selected Poems," H. R. Hays, the translator, was faced with a simpler task, for he deals here with no lyricist of cloudy symbols but with a class-conscious propagandist to whom matter is paramount, and whose manner, individualistic as it is, is custom-tailored to united fronts and party lines. Brecht uses poetry as a means, not an end. Whatever he says is preconditioned by his social or political convictions. These are sincere and forceful enough, but an honest passion does not always make a good poem. There is little here, in fact, that could not have been said more effectively in prose. Brecht's ballads are for the most part tracts, powerful as indictments of our time. They make their appeal directly from empty bellies to the sword. Some of them are lifted to song by flaming anger against injustice, by



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personal grief or shame or the memory of loss. The preoccupation however is largely with the unhappy, unhelpful, disintegrating side of life. There is no denying that Brecht has a case, but it is one-half of the picture; the other half is never shown. If there is any pity or love expressed here, it is, in the main, self-pity and self-love. To this bitter and disillusioned poet "all is lie and bluff," and Lenin alone is the prophet. His ballads of soldiers, workers, and unfortunates of every description are like revolutionary slogans in a death-to-the-enemy campaign.

Comrades, here's the place for you.
So fall in with the workers' united front
For you are a worker, too.

Brecht laments only the lot of the proletarian, the soldier-comrade, the class hero. How differently, for example, Wallace Stevens: "Of all/The soldiers that have fallen, red in blood . . . the soldier of time, grown deathless in great size."

Few persons in America, apart from those who think like Brecht, will care much for this type of verse:

Slave, who is it who shall free you?
Those in deepest darkness lying,
Comrade, these alone can see you,
They alone can hear you crying.
Comrade, only slaves can free you.
Everything or nothing. All of us or none.
One alone his lot can't better.
Either gun or fetter.
Everything or nothing. All of us or none.

Rilke probes the enigma of love, beauty, man, God, and eternity. Brecht sees only economic oppression, social injustice, horror, futility. And this, as J. Donald Adams says, "is not good enough for our time." We are looking for "a literature of courage," not of defeat.

Poet-Prophet-Problem

SELECTED POEMS OF D. H. LAWRENCE. With an Introduction by Kenneth Rexroth. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions. 1948. 148 pp. \$1.50.

Reviewed by JEAN STARR UNTERMEYER

D. H. LAWRENCE as poet, prophet, and problem has been thoroughly and variously dealt with in America by F. R. Leavis, Horace Gregory, William York Tindall, and Mabel Dodge Luhan, to name a few of the most outstanding commentators. On the question of the poems I feel there is little to add at the moment, except thanks for the handy format of the new selection lately printed by New Directions with an introduction by Kenneth Rexroth. On the jacket cover Mr. Rexroth's contribution is characterized as "revolutionary in its new and challenging insights," and it opens promisingly enough. But soon Mr. Rexroth, who apparently has indulged in a lot of promiscuous reading, culls from it to produce a brilliant-sounding essay that may serve to dazzle a few readers but does not succeed in casting further light on Lawrence and his problems, which were at once personal and symptomatic of the era.

In one statement, for instance, Mr. Rexroth links the malaise of Lawrence to the experience of St. Augustine, asserting that "the Confessions introduce a new sickness of the human mind, the most horrible pandemic and the most lethal ever to afflict man. Augustine did what silly literary boys in our day boast of doing. He invented a new derangement." To one reader, at least, such an unsubstantiated theory smacks as much of lunacy as heresy, especially coming in the same essay where, ignoring Sophocles and disputing Freud, he says of the Oedipus Complex that "before Augustine there was really nothing like it," and dismisses the idea of "sublimation" with the flippant parenthesis "(whatever YMCA evasion that may refer to)." There is in this, as in other of his pronouncements, the same kind of irresponsibility that amounts to frivolity.

Another instance of this kind of rash verbalism is the following: "All artistic conventions are a method of spiritual deficit-financing. If they were abandoned, the entire credit system of Poets, Ltd., would be thrown into helpless confusion. It is just as well that the professors have led the young, in my time, away from free verse to something that can be taught. No one could be taught to be a Lawrence. . . ." No, indeed, nor a Keats either, though the latter worked through the conven-