

Sybarite, 32 B. C.

EPICURUS MY MASTER. By Max Radin. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 142 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by MILTON K. MUNITZ

IN THE year 32 B.C. in Rome a man was slowly starving himself to death rather than continue to suffer the pains of what he took to be an incurable illness. Titus Pomponius Atticus, then seventy-seven years old, had lived a full and rich life. The history of Latin literature and Roman affairs accords him a relatively minor role and his name is unlikely to evoke, except in the minds of specialists, any mark of recognition. Such few brief things that he wrote are no longer extant, yet here was a man who in his own day achieved a special kind of prominence and, under the revivifying pen of Professor Radin, illustrates a career that continues to exhibit a special kind of interest. Atticus (so nicknamed because of his long sojourn in Athens, where he assimilated the best that was then available of Greek genius in its literature, philosophy, and art) enjoyed a unique combination of human gifts, partly the result of chance and family background, partly the outcome of his own single-minded devotion to a mode of life which he practised with consistency and mastery.

As a wealthy banker, his support was sought for by many of the politically great of his day. For Atticus, however, his wealth was essentially a means of accumulating such treasures of art and physical comfort that make for refinement in living. Among his friends and intimates were to be found the great and the near great in the world of affairs and letters. Cicero had been a lifelong friend of his and they carried on a long correspondence. Political rivals like Octavian Caesar, Marc Antony, Julius his intimates.

Suppose such a man were to write his autobiography. What might it be like? Professor Radin has asked him-

We Are the Music Makers

By Ben Ray Redman

WRITING by light so black it blinds us.

We seek to shape the chaos of a time
That has the soul of an exploding star;
And every working moment finds us
Busy reducing galaxies to rhyme—
But still uncertain who and what we
are.



self this provocative question and the work before us provides his answer. What we find is the fruit of a variety of interests and an opportunity for appreciation on several levels. Professor Radin is a learned classicist but his scholarship is made to serve the ulterior purpose of imaginative and sympathetic reconstruction of a life that expressed a dominant mode of thought. To the historian, interested in the turbulent years of the first century B.C. in Roman affairs, a century also fateful for world history, this book offers a way of seeing those events as focused through the eyes of a man who lived with and among those who were to shape its character. At the same time and on another level, however, what we have are the reflections and sentiments of a mind for which the philosophy of Epicureanism guides its estimates and choices. Such a philosophy had in ancient times a long history, and has had throughout subsequent ages its many adherents. With systematic thoroughness, but at the same time with an unforced naturalness, Professor Radin explores the philosophy of Epicureanism through the eyes of the reminiscing and meditative Atticus as it touches on such themes as the uses of wealth, the institution of slavery, the practice of war, the values of a possible world dominion under a single power, friendship, art, love, the nature of the gods, death, the pursuit of pleasure.

The outcome is a work which can assume its own distinctive place in the literature of Epicureanism. Its special value is not that it offers any profound statement or critical estimate of that philosophy. What it does offer is a simple and effective restatement of what such a philosophy meant in the life of a disciple.

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Poetess, 1860's

THE WORLD OF EMMA LAZURUS. By H. E. Jacob. New York: Schocken Books. 222 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by NATHAN L. ROTHMAN

EMMA LAZURUS was sensitive, romantic, a daughter of wealth, and, beyond that, daughter to every romantic impulse that stirred the intellectual world of her times, in the 1860's and onward. At the age of seventeen she met Emerson at Sam Ward's house; a year later she was sending off a copy of her first book of verse to Concord and beginning a correspondence and a friendship that was to last many years. I think an examination of his letters to her and of her poems (from both of which Mr. Jacob quotes widely) will show that the aging philosopher erred on the side of generosity, addressing her as though she were a young poet inspired with the divine fire. It would be truer to say that she lived in its reflected glow. (Certainly Emerson's failure to include her finally in "Parnassus," his anthology of English and American poetry, came as a terrible and incomprehensible blow to her.) Emma was deeply responsive to the emotional impulses that shaped the great romantic poetry of the century. Heine, Byron, Shelley, Whitman—she absorbed them into her blood stream and spoke with their tongues. It is curious that she wrote, of Longfellow, at a later date: "One could almost guess from any volume of his poems, what great poet he was reading at the time, and by what foreign influence he was dominated"—for this was so closely true of her own writing.

She was not, then, a great creative personality, but she was a person of fine and prophetic perceptions. She vibrated to the best thoughts and feelings of her age, and on at least one occasion gave voice to them with a power all her own. This was of course her famous sonnet "The New Colossus," the most notable line of which is engraved at the base of the Statue of Liberty. For the rest, her poetry must of necessity remain shadowed in the obscurity that settled about it after her death. Yet she may survive, in those dovetailed histories of literary friendships, the close friend of Rose Hawthorne and Marian Evans, the correspondent of so many of her great contemporaries. Mr. Jacob's book is not in any sense critical but it is an honest and lucid statement. It gives us more detail and shading than we have had before, in the portrait of a poet who, if not great, was nevertheless noble and heroic in the Emersonian sense.

Poetry. *The life work of Charles Erskine Scott Wood, a great figure in American poetry, a man who was like one of the major prophets of old judging his own time—yet also a poet of delicately molded lyrics—is appraised below. Likewise, an established English poet of sensitive modernism, Stephen Spender, receives attention, while several younger poets of Canada come before us. If of anthologies there seems no end, still Kenneth Rexroth on the new British poets shows his individuality in the composition of one, and the sincerity and enterprise of Geoffrey Grigson in London and Stanton A. Coblenz in America result in interesting collections in the most creative of the arts.*

Pagan Enemy of Sham

COLLECTED POEMS OF CHARLES
ERSKINE SCOTT WOOD. Fore-
word by Sara Bard Field. Intro-
duction by William Rose Benét.
New York: The Vanguard Press.
320 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by GUSTAV DAVIDSON

THOSE familiar with the satiric prose dialogues in "Heavenly Discourse" have long known that their author, the late Charles Erskine Scott Wood, was primarily a poet. The best proof of that fact is contained in "Collected Poems," a handsomely designed, 320-page volume in which Sara Bard Field, companion, wife, and fellow-worker of the California sage, has assembled his major works in prosody: the famous, long, philosophical "Poet in the Desert," the collection of Western verse, "Poems from the Ranges," and miscellaneous lyrics which made their first appearance in magazines no longer published. The acknowledgments on the verso of the title page are revealing, not only as to the variety of sources, but also as to dates of original publication, the earliest going back to 1919, the latest (a posthumous one) to 1945. Colonel Wood died in 1944 at the age of ninety-two.

The book is divided into seven sections, the first five given over to the shorter poems. Both in content and treatment they hew close to familiar patterns. Most of them are indistinguishable from the work of other poets of lesser stature. Here and there, as in "To a Dead, Black-Headed Grosbeak," "When Trilliums Wake," and "Diana," the lines are of a dewy freshness, carry an exquisite and weightless burden of song:

Little apostle of the spring's delight.
The expectant morn
Will listen on the hilltop but in vain.
He will not hear his little priest again.



Or they are freighted with emotions at once spontaneous and uniquely expressed, as in parts of "But Still There Shall Be Gods." But more often than not the work is of slender poetic substance, repetitive, transparent, and of a childlike naivete.

On the other hand, Wood is rarely perfunctory or didactic, even when he inveighs, like another Jeremiah or Micah, against the evils of his generation. At all times he is passionate and unreserved in his avowals and persuasions. His "Two Sonnets from Sonnets to Sappho," "I Looked on My Beautiful Woman Sleeping," "In Our Cheap, Transient Room," and others declare the honest male ardor as forthrightly as Whitman's "A Woman Waits for Me," or "Song of Myself," or Lawrence's Rhine Journey cycle. But Wood's eroticism is handled with greater poetic restraint. Which is not to say that he is as good as, or better than, Whitman or Lawrence; only that he bears favorable comparison.

When he lifts his sights from the particular to the universal, as he does in later sections of the book, he steps forth as the "doughty seer," the natural "yea-sayer," and "no palate was ever more sensitive than his to the wine of life." As Mr. Benét warmly speaks of Wood in the introduction: "Most of his life was spent . . . at grapple with the effects of greed and monopoly"; he was "a laughing enemy of sham, an arch foe of social and political hypocrisy, a heretic

nearer to the living God than many a devout believer." All this comes through in his longer verse, particularly in the "Poet in the Desert." Here, alternating in his rhapsodies and recriminations, invoking pity and love for blameless babes or calling down the wrath of heaven upon tyrants and enslavers, Wood claims as his brothers and sisters (in the voice of the "Poet," a symbolic abstraction) all "murderers, thieves, prostitutes, criminals," averring at the same time that even before they were born "I prepared you/For the brothel and the gallows." Reformer and artist, as Sara Field points out, "perpetually struggled for mastery in him, producing, according to their balance or unbalance, some of his best and worst work." True. But the pagan delight in life overrides all other feelings.

Wood lived no interior existence. Neither by creed nor creation does he pose any mystery for us. All he did and wrote are an open book. The poems are eloquent of the outdoors, shimmer with sunlight, "live and move and have their being in an amplitude of space, animated with wings, water, wind." And while he sees life, in words reminiscent of Whitman, as a dreary and oftentimes hopeless procession:

I hear the hungry roar of furnaces;
The clang of hammers and the clank
of chains;

The women, mothers of children,
. . . crypts of the ages;
The innocent children . . .
Bearing the seeds of the unknowable
Future

he also hears

. . . the roll call of the woodpecker
Drumming Pan and his little
goat-mouthed satyrs
From the shadowy forest

and

The mournful cooing
Of doves near the bubbling spring.

No one will quarrel with Wood's revolutionary ardor, his abhorrence of privilege, his zest for life, his uncompromising devotion to social betterment. As a poet, however, it is difficult, with all the good will in the world, to accord him major rank. In the tens of thousands of words which poured from him, one comes upon many passages of arresting power and splendor, but the highest levels are not often scaled, and the output on the whole is only better than average. Nevertheless, a place must be made for Charles Erskine Scott Wood beside the bards of America who laid their lives and their gifts, in full and incorruptible measure, on the altar of song.

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