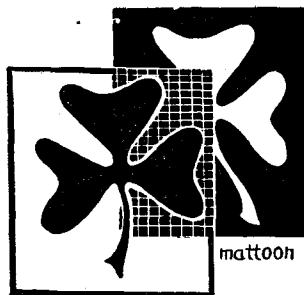


modern nonsense than Belloc's, you may be sure, and you will sample a cup in "Tea for 120 Million."

It seems to me that Mr. Newman can hang up his neon sign and begin to serve his customers. If he has something new to offer in light verse, it is the verse-version of the fabulous story which Stephen Leacock could fashion so remarkably in prose. And Mr. Newman can handle Negro dialect about as well as anybody.

Yes sah, it's all true . . . you c'n take a look;  
Sez it in de Bible, fust part of Genesis . . .  
Good Ole Testament, ev'rybody's Book . . .  
Same fer de Cohns as it is fer de Dennises.

He can do a lot of other things, too. Some of his word exercises are not as happy as they could be in the light of



some of his other disciplines—as the reader will observe in the verse beginning "Viola owned a violin." He is best when he is terse.

The tiny shred of cosmos,  
To call the matter quits,  
Blew Wine and Word and Wafer  
To sub-atomic bits,

Thus proving, peradventure,  
We still are unprepared  
To monkey with the thesis  
That E is MC<sup>2</sup>

## Ingenuous Ingenuity

COLLECTED POEMS OF WILLIAM EMPSON. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1949. 113 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GERARD PREVIN MEYER

WILLIAM EMPSON'S ingenuity is so ingenuous that it is impossible not to like and respect the ambiguities in his poetry—even when it is next to impossible to fathom them. The man has such an engaging air! When he writes, in a note to one of his poems, "I hope the gaiety of the thing comes through," you hope so, too. In their venturesomeness, indeed, the poet Empson of these "Collected Poems" and the critic Empson of "Seven Types of Ambiguity" are equally boyish.

Therefore, however much I. A. Richards's favorite pupil may entangle himself (and his poetry) in his theory of ambiguity, at the same time that he is employing metaphysical wit in the manner of Donne and Marvell, there is nothing of the tortuous about him. True, his metaphors do lean rather too obviously upon the very latest mathematics and science (so did Donne's in his day); true, too, he finds it necessary to devote about twenty-five pages of the "Poems" to prose explication. But the notes are actually helpful and quite modest:

. . . it seems to me that there has been an unfortunate suggestion of writing for a clique about a good deal of recent poetry, and . . . very much of it might be avoided by a mere willingness to explain incidental difficulties.

The ungenerous reader can, if he wishes, interpose a cavil or two at this point—is not Empson too willing to explain the difficulties in his work, as if the poems existed largely for the pleasure of explication? Also, how incidental are the difficulties? Still, the notes are notable for their frankness in setting forth Empson's method as well as his purposes. For example, he writes of "Your Teeth" (incidentally, the titles of these poems are not the least of their qualities):

I suppose the reason I tried to defend my clotted kind of poetry was that I felt it was going a bit too far.

If Empson's poetry is "clotted," it's not because it has no discernible meaning but because it has—sometimes too much. Sometimes the meaning does not all get onto the printed page—but then, as critic Empson has gone far to show, it rarely does. If it did, the poetry would be flat; as it is, it's often unconscionably bumpy, to

## Your Literary I. Q.

By Howard Collins

WHICH ARE WHICH?

Helen Pettigrew, of Charleston, Ark., is the author of this week's quiz. Allowing five points for each correct answer, a score of sixty is par, seventy is very good, and eighty or better is excellent. Answers on page 37.

- Which are fat? (a) The Ancient Mariner (b) Little Buttercup (c) Falstaff (d) Cassius (e) Katrina Van Tassel (f) Don Quixote
- Which are horses? (a) Flicka (b) Bambi (c) Wolf (d) Lad (e) Lassie (f) Black Beauty
- Which are glad? (a) Pippa (b) Niobe (c) Jaques (d) Bob Cratchit (e) Hamlet (f) Pollyanna
- Which are knights? (a) Canute (b) Arthur (c) Launcelot (d) Launfal (e) Galahad (f) Lohengrin
- Which are villains? (a) Beowulf (b) Sydney Carton (c) Iago (d) Mr. Hyde (e) Fagin (f) Horatius
- Which are aggressive? (a) Becky Sharp (b) Wilkins Micawber (c) Amelia Sedley (d) Scarlett O'Hara (e) Dora Spenlow (f) Mrs. Shandy
- Which are Dickens characters? (a) Mr. Square (b) Mr. Pecksniff (c) Mr. Britling (d) Mr. Pickwick (e) Mr. Podsnap (f) Mr. Deeds
- Which are shrews? (a) Mrs. Van Winkle (b) Mrs. Petruchio (c) Mrs. Caudle (d) Mrs. Copperfield (e) Lady Godiva (f) Mrs. Jellyby
- Which are outlaws? (a) Rob Roy (b) Robin Hood (c) Simon Pure (d) Javert (e) Roderick Random (f) Tam O'Shanter
- Which are weavers? (a) Nick Bottom (b) Silas Marner (c) Madame Defarge (d) Thisbe (e) Arachne (f) The Lady of Shalott
- Which went to sea? (a) Alexander Selkirk (b) Childe Harold (c) Rasselas (d) Old Kaspar (e) Enoch Arden (f) Jim Hawkins
- Which is not a character in fiction? (a) Little Eva (b) Little Dorrit (c) Little Minister (d) Little Rhody (e) Little Nell (f) Little Lord Fauntleroy
- Which are lawyers? (a) Macbeth (b) Mr. Tutt (c) Portia (d) Dick Whittington (e) John Gilpin (f) Silas Marner
- Which are beauties? (a) Jane Eyre (b) Cleopatra (c) Venus (d) Galatea (e) Helen of Troy (f) Minnehaha
- Which was a preacher? (a) Dr. Primrose (b) Charles Surface (c) Martin Arrowsmith (d) Jean Valjean (e) Edward Waverley (f) Lochinvar
- Which are murderers? (a) Dunstan Cass (b) John Silver (c) Jeff Peters (d) Othello (e) Franklin Blake (f) Eugene Aram
- Which died by drowning? (a) Ophelia (b) Desdemona (c) Ginevra (d) Clementine (e) Camille (f) Nana
- Which is associated with a bird? (a) Elaine (b) Lenore (c) Cordelia (d) Margaret (e) Ophelia (f) Viola
- Which are operas? (a) Salome (b) Daisy Miller (c) The Girl of the Golden West (d) William Tell (e) Ben Hur (f) The Magic Flute
- Which are teachers? (a) Ichabod Crane (b) Jonathan Oldbuck (c) Uncle Toby (d) Peter Wilkins (e) Mr. Squeers (f) Nicholas Nickleby

the detriment of rhythm, although most of the bumps are natural to the rugged rhythm of conversational speech.

As a poet, Empson remains distinctive. While one of the "new signatures" of 1932, he is no more an element of the Auden climate than his friend and co-signer Richard Eberhart. This despite the fact that he can do a wicked reverse on the Auden line when he cares to: evidence "Just a Smack at Auden," with its mocking refrain. For further information as to where he stands, see Empson's salute to Yeats in "Autumn on Nan-Yueh," which poem also gives the back of his hand to social poets ("The revolutionary romp") and surrealists ("The superrealistic comp./By a good student who enjoys/A nightmare handy as a bike").

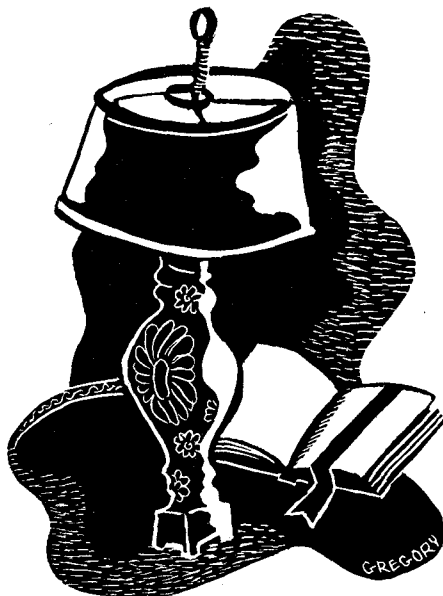
Above all, here is a mind at work, examining the faces of familiar things and familiar ideas from odd and unsuspected angles, dredging up new metaphors, on occasion opening paths to sudden heights. "This Last Pain," for one, recaptures the splendid insouciance of the Caroline poets, together with some of their compelling lyric elegance:

Feign then what's by a decent tact  
believed  
And act that state is only so  
conceived,  
And build an edifice of form  
For house where phantoms may  
keep warm.

Imagine, then, by miracle, with me,  
(Ambiguous gifts, as what gods give  
must be)  
What could not possibly be there,  
And learn a style from a despair.

There is a mastery here which goes  
beyond explication.

## Contribution to New Criticism



**SENSE AND SENSIBILITY IN MODERN POETRY.** By William Van O'Connor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1948. 278 pp. \$4.

Reviewed by ROBERT HILLYER

**W**E might find something to recommend in Mr. O'Connor's pages were it not for the limitations imposed by his dogmas. Unfortunately, the self-styled "new criticism," to which this book is a modest contribution, has set up fanatical taboos and hysterical idolatries.

Mr. O'Connor's reading in the group he represents is profound. T. S. Eliot does not go unmentioned; in fact, the index shows him to be the major source of reference, with no less than thirty

citations, some of them pages long. Tate and Ransom tie for second place. But beyond the confines of his group and their standard preferences, Mr. O'Connor does not go. His bibliography includes only four works published prior to 1934, these incunabula being dated, respectively, 1931, 1900, 1929, and 1930. New criticism indeed!

He is not warmly interested in some modern poets. For example, his remarks on Edwin Arlington Robinson could be supplied if not amplified by any high-school student. We are informed that "Robinson, too, employed dramatic irony, as in 'Richard Cory'." Again, "Robinson, also, frequently indicates the intimate relationship between the chill New England climate and the character of her people." Lastly, "R. P. T. Coffin writes very ably of the Maine tradition, its decay and disintegration, which informed the poetry of Robinson." I should recommend to Mr. O'Connor a careful reading of "Amaranth" (by E. A. Robinson).

Robert Bridges is not mentioned. Neither is Siegfried Sassoon. Hardy and De la Mare are dismissed with a mention or two, Aiken with a handsome compliment. Stephen Vincent Benét is a "God-Bless-America" poet before "whose idealism and sentimentality . . . one feels uneasy." A few platitudes are awarded to Frost, who is unfavorably compared to Eliot, Tate, and Stevens.

Apparently modern poetry is like mistletoe hanging in air with no roots in the past. Chaucer is represented by one "ironic" line, irony being to the "new critics" what social significance was to the proletarian critics or King Charles's head to Mr. Dick. Nothing is said of our great background, of prosody, of the classics, of Anglo-Saxon rhythms.

I will now list eighteen modern poets who cannot be adequately appraised without knowledge of that background ignored by Mr. O'Connor: Robinson Jeffers (scarcely mentioned by Mr. O'Connor, whose ignorance or ignoring of the classics leads him to place Jeffers among the "followers of Whitman"—a most unlikely choice), George Santayana, E. A. Robinson, Robert Frost, Elinor Wylie, Louis Untermeyer, H.D. (not mentioned), T. S. Eliot, Horace Gregory, Robert Bridges (not mentioned), Siegfried Sassoon (not mentioned), Wilfred Owen (not mentioned), Marya Zaturenska (not mentioned), Thomas Hardy, A. E. Housman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Walter de la Mare, and James Stephens (not mentioned).

(Continued on page 39)

## To Obstinacy, an Angel

By Theodore Spencer

**K**EEP us still; still, please!  
Should we ever bend our knees,  
Keep them stiff in shade or sun  
Till what we've said we'd do we've done;  
And when we think we've done it right  
Keep us thinking there all night,  
So what we stare at in the sun  
Seems only something half begun.  
Keep us erect through night and day  
So that we'll not be forced to say  
"Keep us erect."

When you've done  
Leave us breath to stand alone  
As, blowing dust off from the stone,  
Shaping the Possible from Must,  
Knowing that stone is also dust,  
We carve, we try to carve, we carve  
The Face without whose smile we starve.