

**Poetry.** *Modern Greek poetry has at last found its superlative translator in the truly re-creative work of Rae Dalven. Of modern Scandinavian not this much may be said, although in the original it is fresh and vigorous. James Norman Hall and Rumer Godden, both well known for their fiction, appear with long poems of unusual merit, Miss Godden's being, in the opinion of her poet-reviewer, a small masterpiece. John Ciardi, a modern young American poet, is one of those most worth reading, while the late Theodore Spencer developed a new brief form that is a real delight. No less an authority than Edith Hamilton praises an English version of Oedipus Rex by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald. Here again the full meaning of the Greek, this time the ancient language, is given play. An honest and forthright soldier poet, Hargis Westerfield, and a book of poetry by the highly acclaimed Thomas Merton are also analyzed below.*

## Echoes of Hellas Today

MODERN GREEK POETRY. Translated and edited by Rae Dalven, with statements by William Rose Benét and Mark Van Doren. New York: Gaer Assoc. 320 pp. \$3.50.

By GEORGE ZABRISKIE

A RECENT photograph of Constitution Square in Athens shows towering above it, on the Hotel New Angleterre, a sign in Greek: "Radio-RCA-Television." Above the sign rises the ruins of the Acropolis.

This year Cooper Union, in New York City, held an international exhibition of engineering drawings. Those from Greece were singled out for technical reasons, and for their trilingual inscriptions: Greek, French, English.

Modern Greek poetry, from its beginnings to our contemporaries, goes beyond the signs of Constitution Square and the trilingual technical drawings in its cosmopolitanism, for necessity has forced its writers to a polylingual life and dispersed residences. From the poets of the romantic revival to those of the modern movement, Athens, Alexandria, London, Paris, Rome, Padua, and the university cities of Germany have been stopping places, home, and burial grounds. If one has the enterprise to think of Henry James as being more "American" than Mark Twain, one can realize why, in this kind of paradox, these Greek poets are always Greek no matter where they live or what they bring home.

Indeed, it might be said of many Greek poets that they have been exiles from all but their language, and in the cases of some of the nineteenth-century poets represented here, the language itself was a late discovery,

as Russian was for Tolstoy. Many of them, even Dionysios Solomos and Andreas Kalvos, the two great figures of the early nineteenth century, wrote poems in Italian before turning to their native tongue. Later poets have been interested in other languages: translations of Byron, Baudelaire, Poe, Whitman, Mallarmé, Rilke, and T. S. Eliot have been made by writers included in Miss Dalven's anthology. Yet these foreign sources, literally from Schiller to surrealism, have been used in such a way that for the most part the term "influence" as we usually think of it does not apply.

From the anonymous demotic ballads to the work of our contemporaries, there seems to be a common element in the acceptance of total insecurity. It is based on the circumstances of life in Greece since the fall of Byzantium, making a fierce struggle for existence the only possible way of living; and from this value of life comes a resentful acceptance of the inevitability of death, symbolized as a lurking threat against which there is always the delusive hope of struggle. The acceptance of what are psychologically and physically desperate situations appears as an element of the present and as an historical anxiety which cannot be remotely felt without reading the poems.

But the attitude of the modern Greeks must not be confused with the ancient ideas of *ananke*: in fact, the Greeks have an indigenous attitude toward their history and myth which is quite different from that of the rest of Europe and America. As the ancient Acropolis rears itself above the neon lights of modern

Athens, it serves as a symbol of the ever-present past, which by the very pressure of its physical existence forces every native Greek to adopt some outlook, if only the reaction of ignoring it.

In the nineteenth century the past was romanticized and, as Miss Dalven points out, the stilted linguistic artifact of the *katharevousa*, or purist, dates from this period.

Not until the coming of Constantine P. Cavafy (1868-1933) do we find a fresh and highly creative exploitation of the past. Cavafy, who spent most of his life in Alexandria, is identified with the Hellenistic period, which he used to project the psychological realities of the present. While Kalvos, the romantic, ends his great poem "The Ocean" with an impassioned and somewhat incongruous patriotic stanza. Cavafy, the realist in exile, ends more than one poem with an impassioned shrug of his shoulders:

Some messengers returned from the border  
They say barbarians no longer exist.  
Now what shall we do without any barbarians?  
Those people provided some sort of solution.

Again and again the rhetorical question with an answer, the reproach to a befuddled world occurs in his poems. He constantly reminds his reader that everything of importance makes no difference to most people. As in Breughel's picture of Icarus, the plowman never notices the first flyer falling into the sea.

Since Cavafy's time contemporary Greek poetry has taken a direction which might be described as a kind of neo-symbolism, if

we accept the term as being only approximate and, like all approximate terms, possibly misleading.

"The Odyssey" of Nicholas Kazantzakis, fragments of which are in the anthology, bids for attention as being one of the more interesting long poems of our time. Although the title and some of the episodes derive from ancient Greece, the post-Homeric adventures of the hero are close to the predicaments of one in a contemporary limbo. Odysseus is a modern man, despite his ancient dress, just as Cavafy's historical characters are deliberately modern, and in some ways "The Odyssey" might as well serve as sequel to Ibsen's "Peer Gynt" as to Homer. The hero's final "Hymn to the Sun," when his craft is overwhelmed by Death's iceberg, shines through the translation.

Like Kazantzakis, Georgios Seferis uses the past, often the Homeric past,



but in a totally different way. It is a shadow, given meaning by a kind of remote human contact, as in "The King of Asine" (not in this anthology) where the chance that the Homeric king and the poet have touched the same stones serves as a symbolic limitation of all the past. The poem, which Miss Dalven has translated, brings out the theme of remoteness in another way:

But night has no faith in the dawn,  
and love lives to weave death,  
just as the free soul  
a cistern teaching silence  
within the burning city.

Odysseus Elytis, the poet who appears last in the anthology, is concerned with the human mystery in terms quite his own. His "Marina of the Rocks" is

Pillared on the rocks without a yesterday or tomorrow  
on the perils of rocks with the combing of the storm  
you will give final greeting to your enigma.

Like the modern Greek, it is caught between the stony trap of history and the stormy snares of the future.

English poets and critics have been aware of the importance of contemporary Greek poetry for at least a decade. Georgios Seferis and the late Demetrios Capatanakis (whose work is strangely omitted by Miss Dalven) have both had translated volumes published in Great Britain, and a transla-

tion of Cavafy is forthcoming. Other Greek poets have been published from time to time in John Lehmann's "New Writing" collections. However, Miss Dalven's anthology is the first significant American approach to the subject, and she has been remarkably comprehensive. The task of translating a whole anthology covering the period from the Byzantine to our own is, by the nature of prosodic and other difficulties, impossible, and it is much to Miss Dalven's credit that she has tried the impossible and come as near to success as anyone can. Her translations are often able to stand comparison with others of the same poets without suffering. It is a curious experience to encounter such a wide variety of writers translated by the same person with, happily, not a disappointment. Her errors are on the side of a straightforward presentation, where our time wants its errors, just as the Victorians often preferred theirs, in the direction of stylistic embroidery.

The preface, entitled "The Growth of Modern Greek Poetry," is more concerned with the struggle between the *katharevousa* and *demotic* than with other factors in the background of the actual poetry involved, but it is well organized and informative. After all, through her translations the poets can speak for themselves.

George Zabriskie won the Irene P. Glasscock Memorial Prize in 1940 and is author of "The Mind's Geography."

## Youth's Smorgasbord

MODERN NORWEGIAN POEMS. Selected by Inga Wilhelmsen Allwood. New York: Bonnier's. 47 pp. 75¢.

MODERN DANISH POEMS. Selected by Knud K. Mogensen. The same.

By CHARLES WHARTON STORK

MODERN Scandinavian poetry has a fresh and vigorous impact, which may be earthy, spiritual, or both combined. It is, therefore, with keen expectations that one encounters these two volumes, which are to form part of "A Twentieth Century Nordic Anthology," edited by Martin S. Allwood.

The result, however, is somewhat disappointing. In the first place, we have only twenty-two pages of original text in each, which is a very skimpy smörgåsbord considering the abundance at the editor's disposal. Furthermore the accent is laid too strongly on the younger, more experimental writers. The material purports to represent Danish and Norwegian poetry since 1900, but excludes almost everything of the more conservative type, even that by living authors. There is, for instance, nothing in the Danish volume by Johannes V. Jensen, the Nobel Prize winner, or by Seedorff Pedersen, a charming and accomplished master of the rhymed stanza, though Pedersen was born as late as 1892. Most surprising of all is the omission of Kaj Munk, 1898-1944, murdered by the Nazis, and by far the most popular poet of Denmark during the war. The Norwegian volume is better in this respect, but surely more space could have been given to Herman Wildenvey, Nordahl Grieg, and Gunnar Reiss-Andersen. The general effect is, therefore, somewhat rasping and chaotic.

The translations into English verse are sometimes spirited, sometimes adequate, and occasionally very bad. What can one say, for instance, of such a couplet as

For in our dread perplexity and blind  
To conquest or to prey turns all we find?

And yet, despite all these drawbacks, the novice in Scandinavian poetry can make some pleasant and vital acquaintances among such writers as Nis Petersen, Tom Kristensen, and Tove Ditlevsen among the Danes, as well as Rudolf Nielsen, Tove Orjasæter, and others of the Norwegians. It is just a pity to feel that these two books could have been so much better in nearly every way.

## Your Literary I. Q.

By Howard Collins

THE NTH DEGREE

Fannie Gross, of Asheville, N. C., lists twenty superlative items that appear in famous literary works. Can you match them with their authors on the right? Allowing five points for each correct answer, a score of fifty is par, sixty is very good, and seventy or better is excellent. Answers are on page 32.

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|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Cruellest month      | ( ) Lord Byron           |
| 2. Fleetest end         | ( ) Thomas Campbell      |
| 3. Fondlest hopes       | ( ) C. C. Colton         |
| 4. Goodliest man        | ( ) Walter de la Mare    |
| 5. Greatest torture     | ( ) Emily Dickinson      |
| 6. Heaviest words       | ( ) T. S. Eliot          |
| 7. Largest heart        | ( ) David Garrick        |
| 8. Meanest of amours    | ( ) Thomas Gray          |
| 9. Mildest manner'd man | ( ) Walter Savage Landor |
| 10. Most beautiful lady | ( ) Charles Mackay       |
| 11. Nearest room        | ( ) John Milton          |
| 12. Noblest work        | ( ) Thomas Moore         |
| 13. Purest ray          | ( ) William Morris       |
| 14. Sincerest flattery  | ( ) Alexander Pope       |
| 15. Smallest effort     | ( ) John G. Saxe         |
| 16. Sweetest isle       | ( ) A. C. Swinburne      |
| 17. Strangest liberties | ( ) Francis Thompson     |
| 18. Surest to the goal  | ( ) Henry van Dyke       |
| 19. Weariest river      | ( ) John Webster         |
| 20. Worst of slaves     | ( ) Edward Young         |