

## A Swift Knife

*THE SHORES OF LIGHT.* By Edmund Wilson. New York: Farrar, Straus & Young. 814 pp. \$6.50.

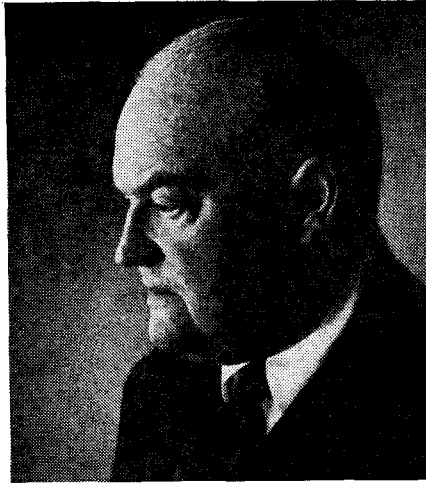
By W. T. SCOTT

EDMUND WILSON has assembled another portly volume of literary chronicle, this time of the decades of the Twenties and Thirties, to stand beside his "Classics and Commercials" of the Forties. "The Shores of Light," as he points out in a brief foreword, "has turned into something rather different" from a straight companion volume in that he has expanded the focus of his intention. He has collected not only literary essays and reviews but also "dialogues, jeux d'esprit, satires, short sketches, and personal letters . . . to contribute to a general picture of the culture of a recklessly unspecialized era, when minds and imaginations were exploring in all directions."

"Contribute" is the careful verb which forbids the objection that this panorama of the period is spotty. The articles concern people and tendencies interesting to Mr. Wilson and about which he happened to write. Thus, there are two chapters on Houdini but none at all on Aimee Semple McPherson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, or William Faulkner. Objection may be made, though, to certain inclusions. There are essays here on Byron, Lewis Carroll, Dostoevsky, Samuel Butler, one or two others, which Mr. Wilson happened to publish during the Twenties and Thirties; they are distinguished and valuable, as Mr. Wilson's criticism is always distinguished and valuable, but they do not really contribute to a memoir of the intellectual atmosphere of the two decades.

Mr. Wilson is, as a good critic must be, a thoroughly literary fellow. Note, for example, what he remarks in a glance at the 1890's: "The happenings and habits of the era—the Bowery, the Cuban War, Clyde Fitch and Lillian Russell, the debaucheries of the Haymarket and the racing days on the Jersey coast—though they may have for us a charm of memory, do not usually wear for us the aspect of having been in themselves enchanting; but they take on a certain literary glamor when we watch them through Stephen Crane's eyes."

Criticism itself also can call up an enchantment and glamor, especially—granting its intelligence—if it is, like these chapters, contemporary. Here again is the stir of Ring Lardner's



Edmund Wilson—"our best critic."

short stories, O'Neill's early plays, and Hemingway's emergence.

As to the gaudier decade, the Twenties, Mr. Wilson is nowhere more admirable than in a chapter called "The All-Star Literary Vaudeville" for here, writing in 1926, he says what is true but too often ignored amidst the glamorous enchantment—that much of the excited writing came, really, to little or nothing. Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, Hemingway, Lardner impress him midway in that decade, but he inclines correctly to dismiss a lot of overrated half-gods. Yet he finds both Robert Frost and Willa Cather "dull."

And here, I think, we encounter an instance among many of Edmund Wilson's one lamentable defect as critic: his uneasy grudge on contemporary poetry. This may seem an odd thing to say of one who has written so superbly of such as Yeats and Joyce, yet the reiterant fact is Mr. Wilson dislikes most twentieth-century verse and prefers to dismiss it by theorizing it should not exist. The giveaway is—and here he is amusingly like Mencken and Poe before him—that he is really happy with the traditional lyricism of certain women poets of his time. And by this I intend no crack at his lengthy personal memoir of Edna St. Vincent Millay; it, and the memoir of Christian Gauss, and a reminiscence of a weekend party at F. Scott Fitzgerald's, all recently written pieces, are among the most memorable contributions this book makes.

He is, take him all-round, our best critic. His standards are high but not narrow. He is serious, but (O, rare!) he writes well. He brings together wide reading and intelligence. He writes to inform and entertain: to illumine. Compared to "Axel's Castle" and "The Wound and the Bow," "The Shores of Light" is in its nature minor work; its attempts are slighter.

## Near the Enemy

*ROSE AND CROWN.* By Sean O'Casey, New York: The Macmillan Co. 322 pp. \$4.75.

By MAURICE VALENCY

"ROSE and Crown," the fifth volume of Sean O'Casey's experiment in autobiography, carries the reader—if that is the proper phrase—from about the year 1926, when O'Casey first came to London after the Abbey Theatre production of "The Plough and the Stars," to the time when he returned to England after the successful Broadway run of "Within the Gates." The span of time may be readily ascertained by reference to any biographical sketch of Sean O'Casey. But it would be an error to assume that one can arrive at this figure with the help of "Rose and Crown." The order of this work is not chronological; if anything, it is topographical. What is intended, evidently, is not a chronicle of the life of O'Casey, but a guided tour of the world of O'Casey or, better still, of the Stations of O'Casey.

As time is not of the essence in this enterprise, the movement of the narrative is engagingly abstruse, back and forth and up and down and sideways; but the effect is rather wonderful. Out of the narrative void, misty with rhetoric, from time to time dark masses loom, sometimes sharply close at hand, sometimes dim in the distance, huge craft and small—Pinero, Shaw and Mrs. Shaw, Stanley Baldwin, Chesterton, Ramsey MacDonald, a negro waiter, the Statue of Liberty, George Jean Nathan. Above all shines Yeats, now visible, now temporarily obscured, an ever-fixed star whose worth's unknown although his height be taken. But in the end, even Yeats snuffs out, and there remains only O'Casey, still magnificently eloquent, while with his free hand he shoos along the Marching People toward the East where the red dawn is breaking.

The actual events of this biography are not in themselves difficult to deduce from the text. The playwright comes to London in his early forties, he meets an assortment of reviewers and other literary pundits, then he is plunged into the memorable fuss with Lady Gregory over the production of "The Silver Tassie." Meanwhile he marries a charming young actress, leases a house with bad plumbing, has a son, moves out of his house for lack of funds, and lands in a deceitful cot-

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tage in Chalfont St. Giles. It is hard to locate him at the next remove, but before long we find him aboard a liner bound for New York, where he shuttles about feverishly, helping his publicity man to sell tickets for "Within the Gates." And at last he departs, "with an Irish blessing to America's people," once more for the land of the Rose and the Crown.

But these incidents, in general, have little interest for the author in themselves alone. Each is a jumping-off place for reflection, demonstration, vituperation, or rhapsody. Not much happens, but this is a very busy book. There are friends everywhere to compliment throughout time and space, enemies to harry, old scores to settle, arguments to make. There is the unrelenting battle with the clergy to carry on, and the Irish war, and above all the class struggle. And O'Casey is garrulous. He has the inexorable flow of language of the lover of words. He enjoys the richness of words, their flexibility, their mischievousness. He turns them this way and that, weaving them and braiding them, making them shimmer. Like Eliot, he is obsessed with tags; like Joyce, he is hounded by sounds. Palpably, both have influenced him; but his God-given sense of caricature and his Irish sense of mimicry are his own, and his style is unique in our time.

The sum total is a self-portrait of extraordinary vigor. O'Casey writes of O'Casey in the third person. He observes the trajectory of O'Casey with surprise, the practised eye of the dramatist following the action of his protagonist with all the interest of a mother observing the progress of an only son. With justifiable pride, but not without suspicion, he sees O'Casey circling inevitably out of the world of the lowly into the sphere of the great, but it is clear to him that he is not and never will be cozy in either world. It is perhaps a bit funny, but there is something vastly pathetic about this first-class passenger whose conscience drives him below decks to visit the steerage so that he may assure himself that even amid the plushy decor of a transatlantic liner, passage prepaid, social injustice exists.

"Rose and Crown" will not find a place, I think, among the great works of self-revelation, nor even among the great works of Sean O'Casey, but I think it will be read with interest and wonder now and in the years to come. For out of this opulent prose emerges a truly unforgettable portrait, which superposed upon the sketches of the preceding volumes, rounds out a personality which will certainly not please everyone, but is most poignantly of our time.

## Yankee Prophetess

THE LETTERS OF EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY. Edited by Allan Ross Macdougall. New York: Harper & Bros. 384 pp. \$5.

By BABETTE DEUTSCH

DEAR Edna St. Vincent Millay (even your name is a lyric line!):

Here is a letter that, alas! you will not have to answer. You hated writing letters. Which is odd, because those you wrote were as witty and tender as your verse. The proof is here in the selection that your friend "li'l Alling" has made from those not lost. I miss most your exchanges with Elinor Wylie (referred to in a note as "Miss" Wylie). But there is the savagely indignant epistle you wrote in her defense against more than one set of fusty-minded literati. And there is the tribute, the more touching for its simplicity, that you sent to Bill Benét when she died.

Another poet once said that letters felt to her "like immortality" because they were "the mind alone, without corporeal friend." But the corporeal friend is vividly present in your scribbles about parties and persons, stomach-aches and heartaches, life in the Village, in the garden, and by the sea, the joys and pangs of fame, home-keeping and travel, and money, money, money, its having and its lack. These letters are you, flippant and petulant and passionate, generous and irresponsible, so exquisitely sensitive and again, O again as blind as Polyphemus after Ulysses struck him. Your friends and lovers are here, too, inevitably and interestingly, as are your publishers, whom you were lucky in counting among your kindest friends.

Many pages offer your contemporaries the pleasure of recognition. Sometimes recognition tastes bitter, as in the letters about Sacco and Vanzetti, whom, with the rest of us, you did your vain best to save from judicial murder. The notes about the case might have been more explicit for a generation ignorant of that tragedy.

Of course I grinned (what fellow-poet won't?) over your liking the polite personal letter of rejection from a famous periodical, "Though," you went on, "they are publishing every day things that I could have written with one hand tied behind me—(preferably my left hand!)." And how I sympathized with you over the editor who said that he wanted certain of your poems for his magazine, "but that there were several obscurities in



—Francisca Bolles.

Edna St.-V. Millay—"no dope."

them that I'll have to clear up a bit, and as some of the obscurities happen to be the best things in them, I sent them off just as they were" elsewhere.

You should have been more discerning about the obscurities of the masters. When you sprang into fame with "Renaissance," Arthur Davison Ficke (of all people!) asked you if you got a line from a book. "I'll slap your face," you retorted. "I never got anything from a book. I see things with my own eyes just as if they were the first eyes that ever saw, and then I set about to tell, as best I can, just what I see."

It was the artist speaking when, on your first Channel crossing, you refused all remedies for seasickness. You "wanted every bit of the experience and no dope." But how then, when you wrote propagandist verse, could you fail to realize that what you yourself properly called "acres of bad poetry" (though God help anyone else who said the same!) was dope of another sort? You were silly about that bad poetry, and you were almost equally silly about the Pound controversy. You knew as well as anybody, and said so magnificently when Elinor was under attack, that a poet's only duty is to his craft. Whoever sees things with his own eyes and tells as best he can exactly what he sees, if he is truly a poet, serves the truth by which we live. You forgot this when you were hard pressed. And I get angry about it. But then I remember the honeyed sops that you threw to Cerberus on your way to meet him. And the salty ones. Here are more. Perhaps Emily Dickinson was right. Letters do feel a little bit like immortality.

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