

Fall to Divinity

"Songs for Eve," by Archibald MacLeish (Houghton Mifflin. 58 pp. \$3), contains a long poem dealing with a theme as old as the garden of Eden and twenty-one shorter verses that in one way or another comment upon it.

By Sara Henderson Hay

EVER since the chronicler of Genesis first told the story of the Garden eastward in Eden writers of both prose and poetry have found in the situation and characters an unending source of fascinated speculation. Innumerable cases have been built for and against our first parents, singly or together. Whose fault was it? Whose sin (if it was a sin)? Was this act of disobedience foreordained or did it place God in an unexpected predicament? There is probably no really new way to look at Adam and Eve and that most subtle of all the beasts of the field, the Serpent, and the disastrous (or *was it disastrous?*) Tree. But Archibald MacLeish, in his "Songs for Eve," has invested his point of view with a wonderful freshness and delight, and given an old story a new lucidity and grace, as well as a stirring and dramatic humanistic aspect.

The basic theme of the sequence of twenty-eight lyrics which give the volume its title is that the cataclysmic Fall, deliberately engineered by Eve, was not a Fall *from* Divinity, but rather *to* it; the fall from earth to God, from the browsing contented animal of somnolent Eden to the soaring of the soul. Man's exile from Eden is his blessing, not in disguise, but to be seen and exulted in; his self-realization, his awakening to his own dignity and destiny as the builder of Eternity.

"Tell me," cries Eve defiantly to the thunder
"How was Heaven built?"

"... Had I not for wonder's sake
Broken law no leaf can break,
Lids were closed that now awake.

... Was it shame and was it sin,
Shameless out and shameful in,
So in waking to begin?

How else can heavenly thunder
shake
The heart but if the heart awake?"

MacLeish's Eve is no ignorant, trifling sinner, but a woman of conviction and courage and spirit and intuitive wisdom; she has none of Adam's self-doubt or divided personality, she is neither humble nor timid. "Who

teaches child that sniveling guilt?" she demands, and a fine, ringing defense of man's own stature and essential responsibility for his being, she cries to her child:

Who said you were bred
Not of flesh and of bone
But of somebody flown
From a place in the sky . . .

Who told you that lie
About body and soul? . . .

You came by the soul
As you came by the skin . . .

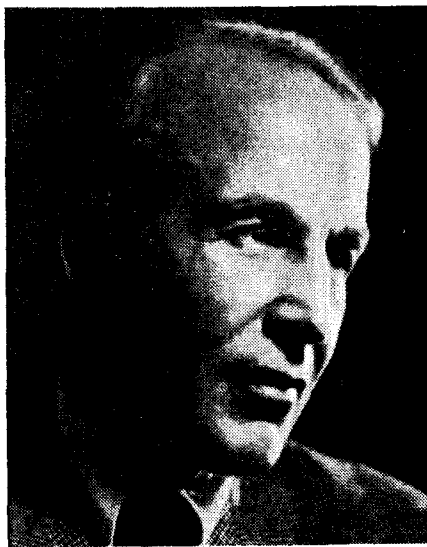
The flight that was flown
From the place in the sky—
The flesh and the bone
Made those wings that could fly.

The second portion of the book is a collection of twenty-one poems, which in a more general way pursue and elaborate the theme set in the *Songs for Eve*. "Reply to Wordsworth," for example, is a variation of Eve's denial of the separate genesis of the soul, coming from afar, trailing its diminishing clouds of glory.

Must there be elsewhere, too, not
merely here,
To justify the certainty of miracles?

inquires the poet.

Archibald MacLeish's "Collected Poems 1917-1952" must have set some sort of record for honors received (the Pulitzer, the Bollingen, the Shelley Memorial Award, the National Book Award). The present volume of new poems contains in its relatively slim confines the same high quality of content and masterly technique, the subtlety, the profundity, the blending of intellect and emotion, the lucent and lyric charm. It is a joy to read, and to think about.



—Fayer.

MacLeish—"the certainty of miracles."

Notes

BAUDELAIRE REEXAMINED: The British critic Martin Turnell has published a really first-rate study in "Baudelaire" (New Directions, \$5). It is excellent in its thoroughness, its sensibility, its own prose style. Though there have been in recent decades good essays on Baudelaire and useful introductions to the various translations of "Fleurs du Mal," I feel quite sure there is nothing in English comparable in intelligence to Mr. Turnell's book.

"The 'Fleurs du Mal,'" he says, "is not merely the autobiography of a soul; it is the autobiography of the divided modern man, peering at his reflection in the cracked and misted mirrors of 'Benediction' or in the sea and trying to decide what manner of man he is." He summarizes its themes as "the picture of a general breakdown of traditional relationships: the relations between Man and God—a world without redemption; between Man and Man—the community dissolves into the anonymous crowd of 'exiles'; between Man and Woman—a fragmentary mutilated religion is matched by a fragmentary mutilated love; and between the different faculties of the Individual—the destruction of the self."

Such materials and attitudes as these have made Baudelaire, a hundred years (almost) after his actual lifetime, an increasingly representative poet; these and, of course, his poetic methods—his satire, his flattening counterpoints to romanticism.

—W. T. SCOTT.

ELIOT ON VERSE: In his characteristically tentative and yet illuminating manner, T. S. Eliot discusses "The Three Voices of Poetry" (Cambridge University Press, \$1.75). "The first is the voice," he says, "of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse."

However glancingly, Mr. Eliot tends in recent years to be a little more autobiographical in his public pronouncements, at least as concerns his career as a writer. So here he draws as much upon personal experience as upon critical observation, and what he has to say about the poetic problems of playwriting may especially interest the greatly enlarged audience which "The Cocktail Party" and "The Confidential Clerk" have brought him. He is interesting in pointing up the differences between such full-fledged plays and such comparatively rudi-

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FICTION

A Generation's Champs

"First-Prize Stories from the O. Henry Memorial Awards, 1919-1954" (Hanover House. 495 pp. \$3.95), brings between the covers of a single volume all of the short stories which won first prizes in the competitions during the past three and one-half decades.

By James Kelly

ONE must agree with Harry Hansen in his crisp introduction to this collection of thirty-four stories which have walked off with first prizes in the annual O. Henry Memorial Awards: a literary incentive is a better and more lasting legacy than a bronze tablet or cement monument. So now we have the readable and interesting blue-ribbon entries of the years 1919 to 1954, with gaps for 1952 and 1953 when the selection committee did not function. They embrace the consecutive editorial reigns of Blanche Colton Williams, Harry Hansen, Herschel Brickell, and current incumbents Paul Engle and Hanford Martin, who "wanted, above all else, a story—a conflict that was resolved, a narrative that carried the reader to a satisfying destination. Style, mood, reverie, sketchy suggestion were all secondary . . . they sought originality, excellence in characterization, skill in organization of plot, power in moving emotions."

Changing styles in storytelling during these thirty-five years (which may be roughly compared to the fashion swing from fat Lillian Russell to flat Christian Dior) are of course intriguing. The unrestrained patriotic sentiment of Margaret Prescott Montague's tale of a young American flier in an English household (1919) and the Edwardian expositions of Maxwell Struthers Burt in his glimpse of vanishing gentility (1920) certainly show a change of pace when read with Truman Capote's fugitive, dismal study of a rootless young man (1948) or either of William Faulkner's poetic, pathetic, legend-haunted entries (1939 and 1949).

There is an air of homogeneity, though, due in part to standards of selection which tapped *Harper's* magazine for more than a third of the total content and divided the rest pretty evenly among the top popular

magazines. But this unity is due even more, one suspects, to the fact that most of the honored writers are concerned with behavior of characters under the stress of social or survival pressures provided by their favorite settings: the two world wars, the sharecroppin' South, the Great Depression.

For the most part the cluster of top-rated stories appeals more to emotion or sentiment than to mind. There is a comfortable air of screened readability hovering over the volume, though one questions the editorial claim that these are the "best" stories of their time. Perhaps they are the best of their popular kind, equal in style and characterization and mood to the run of today's offerings. But where are Anderson and Fitzgerald, Runyon and Lardner, Hemingway and Crane, Wolfe and O'Hara, Marquand and Cozzens, Stafford and Cheever, and the rest on the roster—not to mention Waugh, Thomas, O'Connor, and other foreign ringers who publish on this side of the ocean?

Walking off with quantity honors is Stephen Vincent Benét with three winners, including the familiar "The Devil and Daniel Webster," which still has the shiver-making delight that everybody remembers. Among the other double winners are Eudora Welty, who shows her prowess in evoking animal good humor and rustic talk in a folktale about a back-country man and friends who spend a day dragging a river for a body that isn't there. Kay Boyle joins this group with two war-haunted vignettes which seem oddly formless in the midst of

surrounding plots. And Wilbur Daniel Steele provides sharp insight into the mind of a little girl who must accept a string of "governesses" in place of an absent and ailing mother and then an afterpiece called "Can't Cross Jordan by Myself," a ghost yarn that succeeds in being both funny and moving. The remaining two-time winner is of course Faulkner, here represented by "Barn Burning," a fine, lucid adventure of the hard-pressed Snopeses, and "A Courtship," a romantic epic with an Indian beat.

What's the best story in the book? Plenty of backing could be roused up for Dorothy Parker's "Big Blonde," the enormously deft saga of a simple woman who passes from hand to hand downhill to the attempt at suicide (doubtless with a larger meaning for the year 1929). Or maybe "Snake Doctor," by Irvin S. Cobb, does the best job of hitting its target—which is to demonstrate in the most dramatic terms possible the anguish of superstition among swamp people. And nobody at all could argue against the emotional depth and simple dignity of a lonely woodswoman's romance which Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings calls "Gal Young Un." John Bell Clayton's story of a sensitive boy persecuted by a bully gives a new twist to adolescent pathos (1947); Walter Van Tilburg Clark is represented by a moving tale of an old prospector at the end of the memory trail (1945); and John Mayo Goss gives effective meaning to the familiar (by now) situation of a man in a mental institution who tries one more time to face the world (1946).

"First-Prize Stories" offers plenty of good hours to any reader who doesn't want to work too hard. Maybe O. Henry himself would feel out of place here, as Mr. Hansen suggests, but it's a safe bet that he would recognize warm kinship with the stories and storytellers assembled in his memory.

Small Boy and Bird

By Katherine Garrison Chapin

YOU will never be nearer
Than now, to a bird,
So close in the grass
Where you sit. Inarticulate words
Escape you, soft twitters and cries,
As the wing takes a curve above you
And you hold out your hands to the
bird
As it flies.

You will never be nearer
Than now, to the soft

Whirr and rush of grass-beating
wings,
Where you sit in the hush of mysterious waiting
And watch, eyes very wide. Time is approaching
Over the hill. You will follow.
Soon you will speak, you will learn;
But the moment
When you were almost a little brown
bird in the grass
Will never return.