

WRITERS AND WRITING



◀**THE INTROVERT:** Emily Dickinson's life (1830-1886) contained about as little "action" as a woman's can. Without husband, career, children, or renown, she spent nearly her whole life within one house in Amherst, Massachusetts. In analysing the wonderful talent that germinated in these stuffy conditions, students have tried to pry hints of a wider physical life out of her poems or letters to her one or two male correspondents, but no one can be sure she did anything but think.

THE EXTROVERT: Miguel de Cervantes ▶ Saavedra (1547-1616) like most Spaniards of his era was a man of action. At the age of twenty-two he served as page on the staff of a powerful churchman in Italy, a few years later enlisting in the Papal forces at the Battle of Lepanto, where he lost his left hand. En route home he was captured by a corsair and sold into five years' slavery in Algiers. Only after these adventures, in the 1580s, emerged the wry and profound author of "Don Quixote."



The Quiet Spinster of Amherst, Mass.

"Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography," by Thomas H. Johnson (Harvard University Press. 276 pp. \$4.50), is a study based upon its author's experience as editor of the definitive edition of the poet's work. Professor Edward Wagenknecht of Boston University reviews it below.

by Edward Wagenknecht

HAVING completed his work on the definitive edition of Emily Dickinson's poems [SR Sept. 10, 1955], Thomas H. Johnson now gives us his own impressions of the woman and her work. Despite its subtitle, his *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* is not a biography in the ordinary sense—though it is certainly interpretive—for it is not developed chronologically and a good share of it is devoted to description and evaluation of Emily's poems. The author is a singularly modest man: though he has had opportunities enjoyed by no other student of Dickinson, he speaks generously of his predecessors and looks forward calmly to those by whom he expects to be superseded. "In study of genius," he says, "can go beyond the biographer's limits of sight. There are yet further lives of Dickinson to be written, more definitive surely, and better one hopes, because they will be able to rectify the deficiencies of this one." Perhaps, but we may still count ourselves fortunate if from now on we must keep out with what he has given us. Mr. Johnson accepts Emily's affection for Charles Wadsworth, though scornfully rejects the legend that she once planned an elopement. "She

certainly never made demands on him that were other than proper for a minister of the gospel to meet, though there was undoubtedly an affirmativeness in their emotional response to spiritual and intellectual issues." Her feeling for him importantly stimulated and released her creative energies, and, as Johnson sees it, it was her fear that this release might not survive his removal to San Francisco that caused her to turn when she did to Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Seven years later she told Higginson he had saved her life.

There was no question of love between her and Higginson, the "safest" of her friends, but she did love Judge Otis Lord in later years, and this feeling was reciprocated. Mr. Johnson even thinks that he may have proposed marriage to her after his wife's death. Her affection for Lord was, however, not important to her as a poet, for by this time her self-discovery had been made and her style established. As for the other wild conjectures of recent "psychological" biography, Mr. Johnson treats them exactly as they deserve: he simply does not find them worth mentioning.

Johnson rather severely criticizes Higginson for his failure to "understand" Emily Dickinson's poetry. I wonder whether any among even the major American poets of the time, including Whitman, would have done much better. It is true that Helen Hunt Jackson did, and this is her glory, for though she could force only one of Emily's poems into print, she, above any other person, did bring her friend "a conviction that her poems were of first importance."

Her biographer recognizes Emily's

Peter Pan side (stimulated in part, he suggests, by Ik Marvel); he knows, too, that there was a neurotic or histrionic element in the withdrawal from life which she ultimately achieved. But he realizes too that her emotional responses were so intense that as she grew older she could no longer stand the strain of personal contacts.

For each ecstatic instant
We must an anguish pay
In keen and quivering ratio
To the ecstasy.

The testimony of at least one other indicates that she was right. "I never was with any one who drained my nerve power so much," wrote Higginson. "Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her."

It is interesting that though Emily is generally revered by the free verse crowd, she wrote practically no free verse herself. Her metres derive basically from English hymnology, her imagery from the Bible. Nature, death, and immortality were her great themes. She never confuses God with nature and though she conducted a running feud with God which Mr. Johnson compares to that of the elder Clarence Day, she might have found genuine clarification in Jonathan Edwards if she had known him better. Even as it is, "This Consciousness that is aware" is pure Edwards. I may add, though Mr. Johnson does not, that she might have been helped considerably by what contemporary American philosophy calls personalism. Her Death, developed out of symbol into reality, is called by Johnson "one of the great characters of literature."

Always in Style

"Cervantes: The Man and His Time," by Sebastian Juan Arbó (translated by Ilsa Barea. Vanguard Press. 261 pp. \$4), is a new look at the author of "Don Quixote" by a Spanish scholar. Professor Thomas G. Bergin of Yale's Romance languages department reviews it here.

By Thomas G. Bergin

FASHIONS in literature come and go; realism, romanticism, naturalism, symbolism succeed each other in incessant alternation as generation follows restless generation, but "Don Quixote" is a book that in more than three and a half centuries of life has never gone out of style. The relative merits of its two parts may be debated: one may find the broad and primitive fantasy of Part One more to one's taste than the subtler but more self-conscious Part Two or vice versa; one may laugh or cry at the mishaps of the good knight, admire or deplore the grossness of his squire, but the appeal of the work is enduring. Perhaps more than is the case in most major works of literature, the book's charm lies in the reader's intuition of the personality of the author. Dante has his forbidding austerities, Shakespeare eludes us, but the character of Cervantes, at once gay and melancholy but most of all compassionate, emerges clearly from every page of his masterpiece, woven of his own experiences, flesh of his flesh.

Because that is so, the vicissitudes of the creator of the pathetic Don have an especial interest for us. We should like to know all about him. It seems unlikely that we ever shall, yet in truth we do know more about him than we know of many great writers. We know his parentage, his station in life, a number of domestic details. We know of his gallantry at Lepanto, his years of imprisonment in Algiers, his

thankless task of requisition officer for the Grand Armada, his lifetime struggle with poverty, his all but desperate literary ambitions; we know of his imprisonment and the repeated outrages suffered at the hands of fate and false friends. It is a tale to deepen our sense of the tragic—and alas, also the comic—meaning of life.

Having loved Don Quixote for many years, I should like to applaud unconditionally any book that deals with his creator. Unhappily I must confess to having some reservations about Señor Arbó's work. I find the book unclear in its basic conception; I am not sure whether it is meant to be historical, "scholarly" if you will, or a purely romanticized biography. I have no objection to either kind of book but a hybrid baffles me. And if this is meant to be a scholarly work it is certainly a bad one, being completely lacking in documentation. The translator's preface speaks of "important new documents" which the author has made use of, but in the reading it is impossible to distinguish new—or even old—facts from conjectures. Yet on the other hand if this is a romance it is a timid one indeed, lacking the courage of its own fancy.

Another objection to the character of the work is the author's idea of "the background of the times." The religious fanaticism and moral degeneration of sixteenth-century Spain, as well as her progressive political and economic collapse, are indeed a proper background study for Cervantes's life. But Señor Arbó instead of going into this kind of investigation chooses to give us instead sketches of the careers of Don Juan of Austria, the Duchess of Eboli and Antonio Pérez, in themselves colorful romances to be sure but having, in cold fact, little to do with Cervantes and too specialized to supply really significant "background."

For all that, there are good things in the book. The chapters on the captivity in Algiers are filled with details at once picturesque and convincing, and the same may be said of those dealing with Cervantes's procurement and tax-collecting tasks in Andalusia and La Mancha, those drab and trying years during which, as Señor Arbó tells us, Don Quixote himself came painfully into being. And if the true background, the texture of the times is inadequately reconstructed, yet it must be admitted that he has retold—and quite colorfully—the main events of the period, from the sad and enigmatic affair of Don Carlos to the frivolity of the Valladolid of Philip III, not forgetting the Grand Armada. It is not the book it might have been but it has its uses and its virtues. And surely it has a noble subject, well portrayed.

Notes

THE POSSIBILITIES OF LANGUAGE: The poet Shelley wrote in "Adonais," "Dust to the dust: but the pure spirit shall flow/Back to the burning fountain whence it came,/A portion of the Eternal." From these lines Philip Wheelwright derives the title of "The Burning Fountain" (Indiana University Press, \$6), a volume in which he discusses the language of symbolism.

In an excellent study he considers the expressive depth language of religion, poetry, and myth, as distinguished from the literal "steno-language" of science and logic. This he does in answer to those positivists who deny that language can reveal any insights into realities profounder than the creative minds of the poets or prophets uttering it. Of course, Mr. Wheelwright is by no means the first to recognize that expression may be rooted in symbolic depths of meaning which are virtually ageless. But in a technological age such as ours, which is frequently hostile to truths not immediately demonstrable, his search—ontological and semantic, as he himself defines it—is a welcome antidote to excessive practicality.

Equipped with the tools of the philosopher and literary critic, Mr. Wheelwright is acutely sensitive to the possibilities inherent in imaginative statement. With scholarly precision and exactness of phrasing, he explains the function of symbol and metaphor. He takes up the semantic problems of imagination, relating them to emblem and archetypes, myth and ritual. Interfusing with and developing out general concepts, he takes up particular elements of poetic language which support his examination. Thus, he seeks deeply for the religious source of ancient dramatic action, concern himself with the Oedipus legend, a then with the symbolic patterns of Aeschylus's "Oresteia." For modern reference, he relates his thesis of symbolic archetypes to the poetry of T. S. Eliot, through philosophical-semantic analysis of "The Four Quartets" and "The Wasteland." Mr. Wheelwright's book is a disciplined and brilliant frequently difficult demonstration of the marriage of literary criticism and philosophy. —EDWARD A. BLOOM

D. H. LAWRENCE AS PHILOSOPHER: Readers of D. H. Lawrence usually distinguish between the novelist and prophet; and one may safely guess that he is more appreciated as the former. His credo of blood-consciousness and phallus-dominance carried to destructive or absurd extremes, and even in moderation

SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S
KINGSLEY DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 1138)

ELAINE V. EMANS:

TECHNIQUE

When the sleep you woo
Has no eyes for you,
Think of drowsy things:
Butterfly's bright wings
Folded on a daisy,
Little creek too lazy
To babble . . .

 osprey drifting
Through space, and wood-smoke
lifting
Effortless, quite thin—
Till sleep gives in.