

## Graceful Stoic



**"Robert Bridges: Poetry and Prose," with an introduction and notes by John Sparrow** (Oxford University Press. 166 pp. \$1.40), offers Horace Gregory an opportunity to re-appraise the work of the great Victorian.

By Horace Gregory

A FRESH selection of Robert Bridges's writings is well timed. It comes at a moment when poetic values are suspended in argument, when readers of poetry are often confused, even as they read, as to what poetry is, means, or should be. Though in this country Bridges is best known for being the editor of Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Poems" and a distinguished Georgian Poet-Laureate there is little doubt that he was a lyric poet of very nearly the first order. The present book settles all questions as to his merits.

Bridges's death in 1930 brought an end to a life which began in 1844—which means that he was as deeply a Victorian as his friend Hopkins. Both poets wrote in the shadow of larger reputations, principally those of Tennyson, Browning, Matthew Arnold. Compared to them Yeats was dangerously young, the maker of another world of poetry than theirs. Thomas Hardy as a poet was unknown.

The temporal and physical setting of Bridges's life offers one kind of explanation for his learning. What he was taught at Eton and at Corpus Christi, Oxford—and this a hundred years ago—he held to with the tenacity of a respected and successful student. At Oxford he was one of the favored few; he was well-to-do, good-looking, and an athlete. Though Hopkins entered the Roman Church the Tractarian disputes at Oxford turned Bridges in the direction of Pre-Raphaelitism and toward a form of Platonic Christianity, which as he grew older took on the shadings of Stoic morality as well as militant Anglicism. He equated the idea of Beauty with abstract Good—and that was why the last and most impressive of his longer poems was named "The Testament of Beauty."

His honors came late. He was appointed Poet-Laureate in 1913. He had never been a "careerist." His educa-

tion, of which he felt secure, his private income, his impressive appearance—he was tall and dressed with the casual ease of the country gentleman and poet—removed all the usual motives of those who rush to push themselves forward. To this was added a cantankerous temperament. One of his friends wrote of him: "He has never obeyed anyone or adapted himself to anyone, so he's clear as crystal . . . R. B. is a pernickety, dainty, wilful, self-indulgent chaste old bird." All these aspects of his life and character help to define the annoying flaws as well as the endurance of his poetry. To be, as he was, a Stoical Victorian esthete was a public bid for unpopularity; Epicurean esthetes are more easily tolerated and understood. They are less forbidding. His self-indulgences were often pedantic, and he abhorred the sensual passages in John Donne's poems with the same vehemence with which he rejected their metrics. Some few of his austerities were anti-intellectual and so extreme as to be almost inhuman.

Contrasted with A. E. Housman's lyricism—and Housman's writings are in fair contrast to those of Bridges—his shorter poems have an enduring air of perfected seriousness and grace. The gravity of their conscious art, their Stoical propriety make the lilt-ing measures of "A Shropshire Lad" seem cheap, on-exhibition, and recklessly immoral. At its best Bridges's poetry forces comparison with the work of masters of English verse. Certain of its lines recall the purity of Campion's, while others carry memories of Spenser's music. The Spenserian comparison has resonance if one reads Bridges's "Elegy on a Lady" a second time. Bridges's "Secular Ode" on Eton College, different in kind, metrics, and spirit from Gray's famous "Ode," has qualities of its own that place it in the neighborhood of Gray's. His "The Garden in September" is another triumph, one of exact feeling and observation—and the poem closes with the powerful image of rooks "Settling in ragged parliament," where they "Some stormy council hold in the high trees." No less memorable are the closing lines of "Trafalgar Square" with the sight of Nelson.

As he standeth in stone, aloft and alone.

Sailing the sky with one arm and one eye.

In "The Testament of Beauty" one discovers such lines as

Old Asia's dreamy face wrinkleth to a westward smile.

So far we have Bridges's strength and gravity, and because of lack of space I omit those lyrics whose lines rival certain of Campion's "Ayres."

BRIDGES's preferences were for an archaic poetic diction which, combined with platitudinous abstractions, led him into writing such a line as "flower of lovely youth that art." But later in the same poem where this horror is found he comments on Eros with the strongest insight:

None who e'er long'd for thy embrace,  
Hath cared to look upon thy face.

Bridges's failure was not, as Cyril Connolly remarked, a failure of inspiration. Learned as he prided himself on being, he was a distinctly original poet and often happily inspired. His failure was one of poetic imagination which drove him into reliance upon "unambiguous" yet abstract combinations of nouns and adjectives. Deeper than the errors of these choices was that he could not conceive of a world and a language outside his closely guarded preferences. He was much too fond of his austerities. He never broke through, as Browning and Tennyson did, to less conscious worlds of poetic realities. Bridges wore his "art" too consciously or, rather, he did nothing to disguise it. And this is much of the difference which exists between his poetry and Yeats's.

Bridges's writings now have the appearance that they deserve. In prose one may turn to sure signs of his wit:

. . . the word Utopia has come to mean a state of society presumably desirable, but only feasible if men were different from what they really are.

The Poet-Laureate in retirement at Boar's Hill, Oxford, could smile sternly at the twentieth century as he saw it.

## Oddities and Sestinas

**"Some Trees," by John Ashbery** (Yale University Press, 87 pp. \$2.50), is a new volume in the Yale Series of Younger Poets.

By Donald Hall

JOHN ASHBERY's poems in "Some Trees" contain faults which may be mentioned before we consider his substantial virtues. He is prone to incongruities of metaphor which are easy and no more than cute, like the jazzed-up cliché in "I teach reading and writing and flaming arithmetic." Related is the mechanical elaboration of poems whose only meaning is eccentricity of diction. W. H. Auden, speaking in his introduction of the class of poets to which Ashbery belongs, says of the hypothetical representative, "He is tempted to manufacture calculated oddities." Ashbery is sometimes such a factory. If writing a poem *about* anything seems impossibly difficult (because of the condition of world and word) the poet may write only to give his verbs an airing. Ultimately the result will be stale and repetitious, making only the one statement about language. Ashbery uses mechanical devices for unity in some of these less successful poems—sestina form, and the ceaseless repetition of particular lines or words; and in one poem he begins each of the forty-eight lines with "He": "He cuts down the lakes so they appear straight."

One sestina, "The Painter," is a very good poem about the relationship of artist, subject, and audience. Mr. Ashbery has a fine ear and an honest eccentricity of diction which, used properly, excites the attention and speaks with an oblique precision. In "The Instruction Manual," with its sophisticated use of cliché, "Le Livre est sur la Table," "Some Trees" itself, "Illustration," and other poems, he shows his method to great advantage. His avoidance of directness even in the poorer poems is serious—a refusal to be pinned down when he has nothing to affirm. He writes, "Our days put on such reticence/These accents seem their own defense." When "these accents" include the conceptual they need no defense at all.

**CRAFTSMAN AT WORK:** It is always an agreeable surprise to come across the work of an impeccable craftsman in lyric and elegiac verse. Within the range of quiet observation Christine Turner Curtis has produced in "Fragile Lineage" (\$2), expertly printed by the Peter Pauper Press, a good

volume of poetry. As individual poems appeared during the years in these pages and in "little" magazines they may have seemed incidental and tenuous. But a thread of being runs through them; they are made of whole cloth; they have the design of subdued feeling and valid thought. They possess lucidity and compactness. That Mrs. Curtis achieves such clarity and restraint is a mark of her gift. That she knows her limits and works within them, not straining for untoward effects, is a mark of her good sense. She sees in seaside grass "the source and reviver of human energies" and in "trees and men . . . a fragile lineage." All aspects of the world are indivisible; "rhythm and tune and tide and the motions of men/locked in an entity." And if "in a lean season/men will eat/acidulous plum . . . though they choke and gag/on this gnarled meat/of resignation" she restores in another poem this imbalance:

a life we disown  
in deep-seat wells, brims up  
with intolerable passion  
and the frail dikes go down.

—I. L. SALOMON.

**A SINGING MATURITY:** One poem, "Winter Night," in Melville Cane's collected poems "And Pastures New" (Harcourt, Brace, \$4) is dated 1899. In it the icy ether fires the poet's "smoldering blood," the magic of the heavens steals his "trembling senses" until "My spirits swoon/With the delicious cold, the dark, the riding moon." Obviously a youthful poem. It is George Edward Woodberry—Cane's beloved teacher at Columbia.

All the other poems in "And Pastures New" were written between 1923 and yesterday. Cane may be said to have begun his poetic career in *The Dial* when he was forty-four—a highly interesting fact. What he was writing between his student years and 1923 we do not know but we know he was reading the Imagists and training his sensibility to see and feel afresh.

Now if he writes about the moon it is to say: "On a wild black road/I saw a summer moon/Weave a web of gold/Out of a humming stretch of telegraph wires."

Cane's distinction is that he is a mature lyricist. There are in the 180 poems he has saved no hot ardency, no passion and torment over mistresses, no rioting of the senses, no hardly controllable exuberance—no "swoon," in short. We are given instead the excitement of the perception of the nuance ("the precise, single second when the tide turns"), of the flash ("skip of chipmunk"), of the imminent ("so rare, so mere"); the delight of the observant nature lover on vacation at Westport or in the Alps; the heartbreak of the husband during estrangement and grief; the vibrancy of the struggle against defeat; the poetry of tempered faith in face of death. The stuff of experience Cane draws on is the stuff of seasoned living; he would never echo the sentiment of Herrick: "That age is best which is the first,/When youth and blood are warmer." His material leads him not to reflective emotion as might be expected but to lyrical emotion—and mature singing is not common. Many lyrical poets have stopped by the age Cane was beginning. He is a truly serious poet, but he is saved from gravity by playfulness, the playfulness that makes his light verse delightful and his serious verse springy in spirit.

—GORHAM MUNSON.

**NIPPONESE VERSE:** "100 Poems from the Japanese," selected and translated by Kenneth Rexroth (New Directions, \$3.50), makes claim to excellence in various directions. The introduction is another example of the editor's critical genius and of his talent, possibly second only to that of Ezra Pound, at interpreting and retranslating in our own idiom the poetry of other cultural epochs. The poems—most of them are the thirty-one syllable "tanka," and only a few are substantially longer—are exquisite; the original Japanese, in beautiful calligraphy, follows the

(Continued on page 51)

## Tam Speaks

(A Brief Epilogue to "Tam Lin")\*

By Ralph Robin

WHEN you borrowed me among the uncouth knights  
I would rather have been paid to hell  
Than be a mother-naked man shivering in your green mantle  
But now I know we did well, resolute darling.

\*A ballad to be found in "The Oxford Book of English Verse."