

Saga Out of Vinland



"The Dark Sister," by Winfield Townley Scott (New York University Press. 115 pp. \$3.95), is a saga about Leif Ericson's half-sister, Freydis, and the Viking explorations to the new world. Reviewer John Holmes is a poet, critic, and well-known teacher.

By John Holmes

ONE of the few younger American poets who has the right to do a long poem is Winfield Townley Scott. He put his first roots down in E. A. Robinson, and his earliest growth, "Biography for Traman" (1937), showed it with some honor. "Wind the Clock" was pure Scott, that quiet voice saying plain words, the rhythm his own and stirring. These 1941 poems were all short. In 1942 he published the long poem, still more surely his own, "The Sword on the Table," a striking dramatic-narrative piece on Dorr's Rebellion, a century-earlier fight for the freedom Rhode Islanders thought they had. Then in "Mr. Whittier and Other Poems," in 1948, which is W.T.S. at his best, a long dramatic poem, "Hamlet and Hamlet," proved anew his skill. He was working even then, the news was, on "a narrative in verse, based on a Norse legend related to the Vinland of early America." Ten years is hard waiting for some more short poems as surface-simple, and sudden to open deep and wide, as "Annual Legend," "The U.S. Sailor with the Japanese Skull," or "Fine Morning" or "Swedish Angel," and we still wait.

Scott's newest book, his seventh, is "The Dark Sister," a saga not only because it is about Leif Ericson's half-sister, Freydis, and the Viking explorations to the new world, but because in this poet's language, narration, and sweep a saga truly rises out of Vinland. The hero is not human, but infinitely greater, the land itself bigger than all the human beings who came to it or were to come for centuries. Scott's descriptive passages of weather, forests, the sea, are more the climate of the poem than "passages," but they thrust under our very feet and into our blood. And if there is no hero, as such, there certainly is a heroine, though perhaps not as such. Freydis is the supreme bitch

in literature, man-hating, self-centered, insatiably destructive, black-haired and black-hearted. She is mad and maddening, to the men in the story and to men as readers of this book. Her cold lust for power turns more and more pointless, her perverse treacheries more shocking, and her ultimate dissolution is only the extreme of an insanity that was frightening enough at the beginning. Freydis is real horror.

The story is of the voyage, off-season, of two ships from Greenland to the coasts of Northeastern America a thousand years ago, to bring back wood. On an earlier voyage, Freydis's half-brother, Leif Ericson, had left there the bones of two of his brothers, and some houses. Freydis wanted the houses, wanted Leif's fame, in fact wanted Leif, and moreover the command of both ships, the credit for the dangerous voyage, and the profit. Mad with her wanting, she drove mad and killed by having them kill one another, half her shipmates. She returned, and her strong body and will broke of its own terrible cold burning. Leif himself guessed the truth, and even her rivalry, a motive at least comprehensible, failed her. At the end nothing is left, and it was all for nothing: madness, emptiness.

BUT the two huge and unforgettable forces remain, as created by the poet, the dark destructive sterility of hateful hunger, and the far-shining beaches, "rising in salt-dazzle air . . . the leaves in the wind, the rustle of meadows," the abundance of earth itself unmined, uncut, unused, or lived in, not for centuries yet to be ravaged, named, dirtied, populated. Scott's realization in words of that clean, cold land and time is his triumph in this poem. It lives on in the mind, not because he is long in describing it, but because he has been there. We know with him the land

Like something secret the sun
nourished; like no land
man-founded,

Rising in stone-bright shores, in
beaches slung below green
bluffs, beyond in-running
waves,

Shining fronded and richly
weeded, firred, and over
immaculate meadows that
widened and burned

All the way to the woodside:

Birch among beech against oak
into pine and the wind-flood
through them always

Like a land-tide, a golden surf
shoulder-deep like a noon
ocean.

Though it was ten years in the making, it has been worth it. "The Dark Sister" is one of the most magnificent long poems of our time, for the power and cathartic terror of its story, for the evocation of a past beyond reach till now, and for the range of its effects through language that with equal skill handles character, physical action, seascape and landscape, bawdy humor and superhuman viewpoint. Scott as dramatic narrator moves every figure and works every scene with excitement, whether of bloody human fury or nature's huge being. As poet he performs with a mature certainty, his style bodied full, a man in his prime moving powerfully.

Off-Beat Bard

"Gaius Valerius Catullus: The Complete Poetry," translated by Frank O. Copley (University of Michigan Press. 141 pp. \$3.75), provides a new version of the Roman poet's use of the vernacular.

By Selden Rodman

OF ALL the Graeco-Roman poets it can be said of Catallus alone that nothing stands between him and us but the language. Witty, neurotic, off-beat, fiercely personal in his hates as well as in his loves, contemptuous of tradition, he has above all that sense which is ours that nothing stands between the cynicism of public life and the stale comfort of the academy but the defiant gesture of the artist. In the words of his latest translator, he "released Latin poetry from an exclusive devotion to war, history, mythology, and astronomy. . . . He saw the co-gency and power in the ordinary spoken language of Italy. . . . He knew that even the polite formula and the dull cliché had their poetic uses."

To render such a poet (for that matter, any poet) into a living language, two minimum requirements must be

met. The translator must be familiar enough with the times and the language of the original to produce an equivalent, at least in tone. The translator's equivalent must stand on its own feet as a poem. Mr. Copley, an admirably venturesome professor of Latin at the University of Michigan, generally passes the first test but rarely measures up to the second. Such in-between lyrics as 3, 8, 12, 23, 24, 46, 53, 92, and 112 are adequately carried off, probably more adequately than ever before. But the serious long poems, lacking style in the English, become merely dull. The great lyrics, like 101 and 51, lack magic. And the scurrilous or satirical pieces, for the rendering of which Mr. Copley leans heavily on E. E. Cummings, are embarrassingly tasteless.

In these particular poems, moreover, Mr. Copley is so frantically eager to escape the classroom that he loses all contact with Catallus:

nuts to you, boys, nuts and
go to hell
you pair of little snots,
lacypants

Aurelius
and
Furius

You read my verses, found
a D—y W—d
(good gracious deary me!) and
came to the
proFOUND conCLusion

—and so on for 25 lines (the Latin is 6!), winding up with an outraged Catallus crying, "You . . . want to make a fairy out of me?"—an attitude in one so sophisticated and frankly double-gaited that is simply grotesque. Or take the two-line lampoon "*Nil nimium studeo, Caesar, tibi velle placere/ nec scire utrum sis albus an ater homo*," which is, literally, "I have no great wish, Caesar, to make myself agreeable to you; nor to know whether you're light or dark":

JULIUS CAESAR
YOU'RE A SNOT
I DON'T GIVE A DAMN
IF YOU LIKE ME OR NOT
MAYBE YOU'RE GOOD LUCK
MAYBE YOU'RE BAD
I DON'T CARE
(now go on and be mad)

Admittedly the point, the contemporary reference to some quirk of the great man's personality or discoloration of skin, has been lost. Possibly substituting Churchill or Khrushchev or the original would have done the trick. But not this!

Cummings or Graves, Pound or 'tits could have done it, but they didn't. Credit must go to Mr. Copley or treating Catallus as he must be

treated, as a living poet, and in so many instances succeeding so admirably:

Naso, you're a busybody
and when you go to town
everybody's much too busy
to help escort you down

Naso, you're a busybody
why are your friends so few?
you've got, besides a tongue
so busy,
a busybody, too.

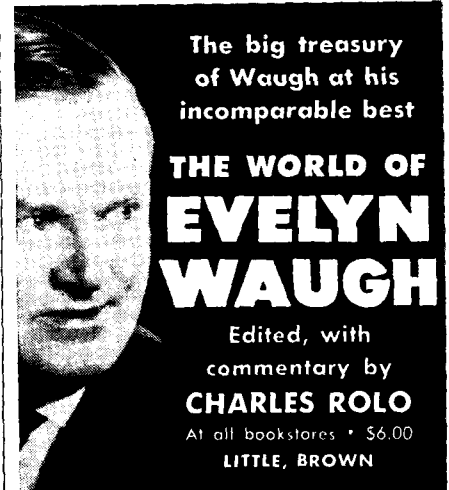
TRIPLE DEBUT: In his introductory essay to "*Poets of Today: IV*" (Scribners, \$3.75), John Hall Wheelock glances swiftly but perceptively at the characteristics of the most characteristic English and American poetry of the present century and then proceeds to defer assessments of the trio of poets introduced in this latest annual than anyone else is likely to make.

The three poets, all still in their twenties, are: George Garrett ("The Reverend Ghost and Other Poems"), Theodore Holmes ("The Harvest and the Scythe: Poems"), and Robert Wallace ("This Various World and Other Poems").

Both Garrett and Wallace are lyric poets; that is to say, they are given to brief, incisive poems descriptive of, with overtones of commentary upon, a swan, a spider, a statue, a particular person. They don't, in other words, sing very much, but one maintains the phrase "lyric poet" as an approximate. Each is a careful workman. Beyond this there are no important resemblances.

In George Garrett's well-made, cryptic poems the objectivity becomes a kind of impersonality. A sense of commitment is lacking, and so the reader, in turn, cannot feel as involved as he wants to be in poetry. He is aware that this and that are well turned but wishes there were something that could entangle him and make him give a damn. Where the object is very specific, as in Garrett's fine poem on Matthew Arnold, sensibility heats up to emotional meaning: one does not merely observe a perception, one is moved by it, instructed and pleased by it. And by that route, I think, we remove from verse to poetry.

There is an amused and charming mind evidenced in Robert Wallace's work but he has not yet discovered his difference. He sees with exactitude and he writes with purity, yet he is still writing too much in other people's ways—not adding to them but simply echoing them. (He is, in fact, only twenty-five; the youngest of these poets.) If he goes on to flourish as a poet—and there are plenty of signs of his talent—he will save little



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