

those days it was scarcely a living language. He thought of perfecting his German, but the similarities between that language and Yiddish, which make it easy to begin the study of one on the basis of the other, ultimately present pitfalls for the writer, the craftsman of letters for whom the approximate is always wrong.

Then suddenly he decided that German was not the right language for him and that he should study French instead. The idea that my brother should keep from writing until he knew French well enough to write in it seemed to me grotesque. He knew only a few words of French. I am convinced that even if he studied twenty years he would never master the language. Besides, his French tutor did not know the language himself.

These backings and fillings, recounted with sympathetic irony, are amusing until we remember that what is at stake is a man's calling, his sense of himself, his usefulness to his fellow men. What I. J. Singer was trying to escape was not the grammar and syntax of Yiddish, but the milieu in which the language was spoken, a culture that he had come to regard as narrow, decadent, stultifying—in his own word, humiliating.

That is how, in our day, the sensitive Western artist—I have no data for the East—whatever his speech and nation, is likely to assess the position. How did Singer resolve his dilemma? Typically, again, by immersing himself in the destructive element.

HE began to recreate in a novel a legend that was based on recent tradition, the story of Yoshe Kalb—Yoshe Mooncalf, or, as Mr. Maurice Samuel renders it here, in a translation that is generally spirited and agreeable, Yoshe the Loon.

Nahum, the shy, frail son of a scholar, is married when scarcely adolescent to the daughter of a rabbi in Austrian Poland. The rabbi, of course, wields temporal as well as spiritual power, in keeping with the theocratic Jewish tradition. Gross, imposing, ignorant, successful, he rules the rabbinical court as a tyrant and makes a good thing of it financially. His daughter, Nahum's bride, is naturally gentle and patient, but at bottom as coarse and unreflecting as her father. Then the rabbi brings home a young wife, his third. Malkah is the daughter of a woman who ran away with a lover; she is wild herself, and incapable of entertaining suitable sentiments of reverence for her husband on the score of age, wealth, or power. She torments Nahum into falling in love with her, and they carry on an intermittent and desperate liaison. Malkah dies in childbirth. On that very day, Nahum

steals away from the rabbinical court, and wanders the roads as a beggar.

From that time on he is known as Yoshe, Yoshe the Loon. Eventually he is pressed into service as the caretaker of a synagogue in a distant town. An epidemic strikes the town; an idiot girl is found to be with child; Yoshe is accused of being her seducer, and he is forcibly married to her in order to exorcize the evil and halt the plague.

The story is one of mistaken ideals, of purity and youth imposed upon and cor-

rupted, of superstition, intolerance, and worldly striving gilded with piety. But it is told with great exuberance, and a kind of ironic high spirits. If I. J. Singer did not spare his countrymen, nor mankind at large, neither did he wholly give them up as unredeemable. That is the difference between Singer and the serious writers working in our own horrendous and listless times. The salt, the leaven, the light have lost their virtue; their power cannot be recovered for art until we have recovered it in our lives.

Bound to the Fate of Her Father

Electra, by Gladys Schmitt (Harcourt, Brace & World. 313 pp. \$4.95), retells the ancient tale of Agamemnon's daughter that inspired works by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Robert Payne's many books include "Ancient Greece."

By ROBERT PAYNE

FOR HALF a century the Greeks have been rewriting their ancient classics, but rarely successfully, for the weight of the past is too heavy and they break under the strain. The interminable epic which Kazantzakis called *The Odyssey*, *A Modern Sequel* is not so much a sequel as a vast tearing asunder of the original legends to find a form more digestible to his own Nietzschean temper. Seferis and Cavafy have fared better, perhaps because they are more humble; they caught the authentic notes of the Alexandrian decadence. An Alexandrian Greek would read them with pleasure; the Germanic overtones of Kazantzakis would remain incomprehensible. It is not very difficult in our own age to recapture the Alexandrian world-weariness. What is difficult and perhaps impossible is to recapture the brazen strength and fury of the age of Pericles, the hard and clearcut edges, the stern splendor.

The game is scarcely worth the playing, or so one believes until a writer comes along who dares to do the impossible. Not that Gladys Schmitt's *Electra* is completely successful. She has evidently saturated herself in the world of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and knows her way about ancient Greece. She knows every nook and cranny of the fortress palace at Mycenae, and she sees it very much as Aeschylus must have seen it. For her it is a dark and heavy place veined with guilt under lowering skies, more like a prison than a chieftain's stronghold, the menace

almost tangible, vaporous and suffocating. In the opening chapter we see the palace far below from the heights of the gaunt mountain where the gnarled old watchkeeper is waiting for the signal fire that will announce the fall of Troy. It is a wonderful opening chapter. Aeschylus, too, liked the bird's-eye view of things. When the young Princess Electra arrives to tell the watchkeeper that her brother Orestes has fled from the palace, and the old man and the Princess are caught up in a common misery, you have the feeling that Miss Schmitt has invented a legend of her own which is completely consonant with Greek legend; and indeed whenever we see Electra there is a resonance and truth which are breathtaking.

In the nature of things such a book must consist of set pieces. The myths concerning Electra and the homecoming of Agamemnon are conflicting; the modern writer must fuse his own inventions into the stream of all the available stories and somehow round them off, so that we have one distinct, plausible picture. Miss Schmitt's inventions are among the best scenes in the book. Her



Gladys Schmitt—"the Periclean touch."

Music, Image, and Emotion

By WINFIELD TOWNLEY SCOTT

IDEALLY, the poor devil who attempts to assess the new books of poetry that have appeared during a three-month period would find perhaps half a dozen to which he felt obligated. He could then devote reasonable space to each of the happy few. But, after roving back and forth through fifty or sixty volumes, after gently putting aside verses by all kinds and conditions of people from an Iowa housewife to the Poet Laureate of England, I still retain a dismaying number of books which it would be at the most unwise and at the least ungracious to neglect.

For me the most unalloyed excitement has come from two new books by one poet, A. R. Ammons. They are *Corson's Inlet* and *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (Cornell University Press, \$3.95 and \$4.95 respectively). The latter is a single long poem, a sort of verse diary extending from December 6, 1963, to January 10, 1964. Ammons wrote it on a roll of adding machine tape, allowing the width of the paper to determine the length of the line. Yes, it sounds like a stunt, and it is—but an utterly beguiling one. Its materials range from daily trivia to God. It is less a diary than a journal of thought, often humorous and always lively. It takes us into a mind that is fun to listen to, quick with response and awareness and search for meaning. And it is accomplished with a light, conversational tone, suitable to the seemingly casual thing Ammons is up to. Sharpness, economy of writing, and an underlying tension eliminate the question of "Shouldn't this have been—or could it be—prose?"

Corson's Inlet, a collection of shorter poems, is denser, though it displays the same ease of style. Walking over the dunes, Ammons says, "I was released from forms, / from the perpendiculars . . . I allow myself eddies of meaning: / yield to a direction of significance." The outdoors inspires much of his poetry, but mixed with "inner weather." Whitman, Pound, and Williams are perhaps the most notable influences, yet Ammons uses the inheritance in his own way. As an observer he is Yeats's passionate man, and he writes with clarity and without waste. At his best he displays a heart-shaking simplicity that is really controlled perception and emotion.

Perhaps as newsworthy is a first book by eighteen-year-old David Shapiro,

who has been praised by the likes of Kay Boyle, Dudley Fitts, and Kenneth Rexroth. It seems to me dangerous for one so young to be already published, but no doubt there are exceptions. As another youngster once said to me when, avuncularly, I cautioned him against haste in seeking a publisher, "What about Rimbaud?" And I daresay it's a good question. Anyway, Shapiro's *January* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, \$4) is suitably difficult, as "strange" on first reading as were Hart Crane's poems. "We work in dream logic," Shapiro says, and that may be a guide to the way the poems leap from image to image and show a strong impulse to wrench poetry out of syntax. "Who are you and what cruelty in what theater / Do you still play cello and strip for friends / Atlantic City fingers warmed by the electric-heater / Sun—a decadent image everybody understands." One has seen such willful beginnings develop marvelously (as with Crane), and also perish early (as with how many forgotten poets).

THE late John Holmes was a completely different kind of poet. His work was always plain, quiet, close to home, like minor Frost; though it reached out farther both for matter and form in Holmes's later years. The bulk of it remained specifically personal; for all the endearing grace of certain lines, the poems fail to rise from the particular to the general. As he remarked, "I shall write poems about myself to myself." There lies the apparently deliberate but unwise limitation. *The Selected Poems of John Holmes* (Beacon, \$7.50) has a good introduction by John Ciardi.

In *ALL the collected short poems 1923-1958*, by Louis Zukofsky (Norton, \$6), the poet ranges from what might be termed formal forms to the free-verse sketch. His brevities are wry as his eye is keen. He is a notable damn-the-transitions man; yet, for all the terseness of style, his often lovely images reveal him to be *au fond* a lyric poet. I have a notion—I am not altogether sure of this—that Zukofsky continues to have only a small audience because he gives one an esthetic but not an emotional experience.

While I'm glancing at elders I should like to say a word too about *Near False Creek Mouth*, by Earle Birney (McClelland & Stewart, hardbound, \$4.50, paperback, \$2.50). Birney is a Canadian, and I cannot recall reading any Canadian poetry as good as his. The volume is a



—Culver.

Aleka Catselli (center) in the film *Electra*—"leaping off the page with her quick-wittedness and bloody-mindedness."

description of the Spring Festival, where Electra and Clytemnestra are rivals; the endlessly talkative visitor from Corinth who ties Aegisthus up in knots; the portrait of Aegisthus as a doddering old conniver with the instincts of a goat; Clytemnestra as a wanton half in spite of herself; above all the quivering, eager Electra with the mercilessness of the very young—all, these are finely and accurately portrayed. Agamemnon returns from the wars, and we see him only briefly; this, too, is as it should be.

But here and there, especially towards the end, there are signs of faltering. Cassandra is an almost impossible person to depict, and her ravings are oddly unconvincing. The murder of Agamemnon is scarcely more convincing, and the return of Orestes in the last chapters carries no conviction at all. For some reason Miss Schmitt concludes on a note of menace, as Orestes and Electra prepare to visit doom on the house of Clytemnestra: the dark smoke rises, but there is no glint of swords. The novel ends like a river vanishing into the sand.

Still, one should be grateful for *Electra*. It is an uncanny portrait, richly worked with the Periclean touch. The girl comes leaping off the page with her quick-wittedness and bloody-mindedness, her charm and innocence, and her abiding savagery. She is quite simply unforgettable.