

Immortal Bard and Others

By JOSEPH SLATER

THREE summers have passed since the August afternoon when Theodore Roethke waded into a neighbor's swimming pool, collapsed, and died; and now we have the thick volume of his *Collected Poems* (Doubleday, \$5.95) to put with those of Frost and Eliot. After all the prizes and the praise and the books about his books, what can be said in a brief chronicle like this? First, that he now seems an immortal poet: a virtuoso of form and melody; a seer of the inner world and the outer one, whose visions shake and sustain the heart. And then, that his stature is enhanced by this gathering of almost all his work into an almost chronological order. His serene and acquiescent late meditations on death are even more moving when they stand only a hundred pages beyond his triumphant celebrations of rebirth; the depths and heights of his spirit are greater somehow when they are seen against the goofy gaiety of his children's poetry and his satires.

Not much of the book is new. Grouped at the end, in an anticlimactic but welcome appendix, there are sixteen poems that had not been included in other collections: an early notation of wren-song, two wry madhouse pieces, some epigrams, some drinking songs, and—best—two light-hearted homages to his elders, "A Rouse for Stevens" and "Supper with Lindsay." It is the Vachell Lindsay poem that all new readers will find now on the last of Roethke's pages, an affectionate, whimsical tale of a ghostly visitation and an ice-cream supper:

I walked him through the grill and out
the gate
Past alder lane, and we gabbed there
a while.
He shook my hand. "Tell Williams I've
been here,
And Robert Frost. They might remem-
ber me."
With that he hitched his pants and
humped away.

How right, how right, that Roethke, the most original and the most traditional of poets, who asked, "What do the great dead say?" who thought always of Blake and Yeats, Whitman and Donne and Smart, should seem to take his leave like that.

John Hall Wheelock's first book of
Joseph Slater teaches American literature at
Colgate University.

poetry, a Harvard College collaboration with Van Wyck Brooks, was published in 1905, four years before Lindsay's first one. His eleventh, *Dear Men and Women* (Scribners, \$3.50), brings together the work of his late seventies: poems of undiminished, even refined artistry and of a somber, glowing October beauty. They are mostly about old age, about the fragrance of life in the nearness of death, about the "sense of transiency," "of absence and of vacancy," about the power, even at the last, of "love's fleeting but victorious hand." Wheelock's art is calm and sure. He easily threads a complex thought through the maze of a sestet or the trap of a set of couplets, sustains a long Coleridgean meditation, turns a resonant phrase or a witty extended figure; but his peculiar strength in this book of his old age is simplicity. "How good it is," he exclaims, "to ramble,/Through leaf-green woods." In memory of Van Wyck Brooks he writes, "I think of those I love/Dear men and women no longer with us." And with nobly unguarded directness he says good-bye to the house of his childhood:

Farewell, dear place, dear house.
Farewell, dear people who lived here
and who are no more.
Farewell, youth and the dream—
All those years,
Such memories, such memories!
Farewell, farewell,
Cradle and grave of my poems.

Robert Penn Warren's *Selected Poems: New and Old* (Random House, \$6.95) might well have been dated 1966-1923 instead of the other way around, for they stand in inverted or receding order, an arrangement suitable for the works of a poet who has always seen the past in the present and stared thoughtfully "down the tube and darkening corridor of Time." At the far end of the corridor lie a few poems from—it would seem—his freshman year at Vanderbilt: charming exercises in the manner of the late eighteenth century and, naturally, an Eliot imitation. Nearer, there are intricate metaphysical compositions from *Fugitive* days and superb scenes and tales like "The Ballad of Billie Potts" and "Pondy Woods," as shattering now as when they were new. The book-length *Brother to Dragons* is omitted, but the other volumes of the Fifties are amply represented and impressive now for their range and variety. They move

from idylls of the Italian shore and the sweetness of fatherhood to acrid satire and contemptuous introspection to piercing memories of boyhood in Kentucky and evocations of the Confederacy; from a line like "No toothstitch of squirrel, or any far fox bark" to one like "He would slide in slick, like a knife in a nigger." Ever since 1923, in all we have known of Warren's poetry, there have been power, intelligence, honesty, and taste; there have also been, not so easy to see but equally important, change and growth.

THE poems of the last five years, which make up more than a quarter of this volume, possess the old virtues, enlarged and extended and differently disposed. In seven long sequences, meditative, narrative, and lyric, Warren poses with more than common explicitness such ancient questions as, "Have I learned how to live?" His answers come not in actions and images only, but in straight statement: "I watch you at your sunlit play./Teach me, my son, the ways of day"; "Truth, in the end, can never be spoken aloud"; "life is of life paradigm," and "there is no water to wash the world away." The key sequence is the next to last one, an ironic "Homage to Emerson, on Night Flight to New York," in which poor Emerson, as usual, stands for a sinless, errorless, smiling, abstract idealism: "At 38,000 feet Emerson/Is dead right." But Warren lives at a lower level where life is specific, and he remembers what an old Negro told him about a wart on his finger: "Son/You quit that jack-off, and that thing go away/. . . You is humankind." For Warren's Emerson everything shines with significance; for Warren the wind off the Sound smells of ice, fish, and burned gasoline, and he hopes only for "A way by which the process of living can become Truth."

More doctrinal, more direct than their predecessors, these late poems are also more lyric and formally more inventive and flexible. Warren makes, when he wants to, dramatically effective free forms:

She
Whom we now sought was old. Was
Sick. Was dying. Was
Black. Was.
Was: and was that enough? Is
Existence the adequate and only target
For the total reverence of the heart?

He plays brilliant variations on traditional forms. But perhaps he is at his best in what he once called "quiet, plain poems," in, for example, the singing clarity of "Finisterre," which concludes, significantly enough, the final sequence of the new poems:

Mist drifts on the bay's face
And the last of day, it would seem,
goes under

But it's hard to tell in this northern place
If this, now, is truly the day's end or

If, in a new shift of mist,
The light may break through yonder
To stab gold to the gray sea, and twist
Your heart to a last delight—or at least,
to wonder.

Pupils are properly slow to praise their teachers, but it is clearly time now to say that one of the men who taught us to understand poetry is also one of our major poets.

Howard Baker's *Ode to the Sea and Other Poems* (Alan Swallow, \$3.50) is a selective volume that gives some indication of chronology, from 1927 to 1966; but its dates do not suggest the period quality of the works with which it begins. For the title poem, for "Destiny: An Ode," and others, 1879 would seem more likely, or even 1829. They are written with force and style, but their flavor of *o'er* and *yea* and *descry* makes them not easy to like until the dominant poem of the book, "A Letter from the Country," discloses what their author is up to. Dissident and conservative, he rejects the fashions of his time, counsels a "program . . . of informed tenacity," defiance, hate, and "frugal narrow-mindedness." "Be much hedged in," he says; "rehearse the ancient ways," and await the return of the masters. In this hard light his archaism is delightful and significant, and the poems that are most his own, especially his disciplined, imaginative sonnets, seem stronger for being part of a program.

WILLIAM Stafford, who won the National Book Award three years ago and who has now brought together a third volume, *The Rescued Year* (Harper & Row, \$3.95), is a consciously ascetic poet. "Where I come from," he writes, "withdrawal is easy to forgive." He denies himself the easy graces of his art, "the less than song, the willows/that say please." As a result, perhaps, of withdrawal and denial, of ellipsis, indirection, and abstraction, a few of his more ambitious poems are puzzling and dull. But his dry, hard diction, his perfectly colloquial syntax and phrasing, true to the language of where he comes from, make their own kind of song:

Mine was a Midwest home—you can
keep your world.
Plain black hats rode the thoughts that
made our code.
We sang hymns in the house; the roof
was near God.

His images ("the plowshare brimming through deep ground"), his figures (the Oregon wind that brings "waterfalls in its breath"), are the stuff that all good poetry is made of. He has wit, even hu-

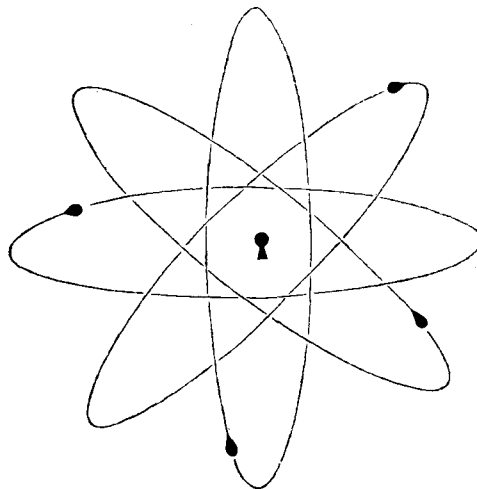
mor; a turn for character and situation, and the imaginative power to rescue or create the past:

Time should go the way it went
That year: we weren't at war; we had
each day a treasured unimportance;
the sky existed, so did our town;
the library had books we hadn't read;
every day at school we learned and
sang,
or at least hummed and walked in the
hall.

What he doesn't have is any need to withdraw or to worry about a few willows.

"Is it not fine," asks Barbara Howes in a poem about poetry, "That there are ten/Or more varieties/Of wild cherry?" The varieties of poetry that appear in her new book, *Looking Up at Leaves* (Knopf, \$4), are fine and rare ones, austere, spare and understated, movingly precise and true. Her subjects and occasions are ordinary enough, though quite her own—swimming with a school of fish, running over a woodchuck, falling asleep in a mountain cabin—but her words are so right, her figures so fresh, that they carry the significance of experienced reality. It is not just that her fish are so visibly *there* ("each one be-dizened/By an ochre spot behind his sickle of gill"); they, like the gull swinging sculptured above the bay at West Falmouth or the leaves and roots of a great tree ("two hemispheres we lie between"), are metaphors for inner realities, suggested or plainly stated. Her figures are imaginatively elaborated:

Like water lilies
Leaves fall, rise, waver, echoing
On their blue pool, whispering under
the sun;
While in this shade, under our hands
the brown
Tough roots seek down, lily roots
searching

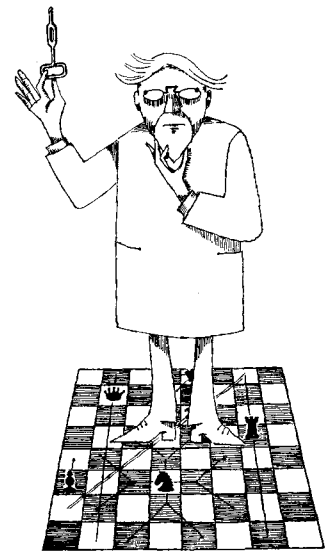


Agnus

Down through their pool of earth to an equal depth.

And her lines are sung in the subtle meters and patterns of sound that make the reader a participant.

Anne Sexton is usually labeled a confessional poet; an ill phrase, that, a vile phrase. But she is, even more than most poets, autobiographical, and her new book, *Live or Die* (Houghton Mifflin, hardbound, \$4, paperback, \$1.95), takes its substance and its very shape from the inner events of her life. She has arranged her poems in the order of their composition and given them precise dates, from January 25, 1962, to "February, the last, 1966." The story they tell is about a journey back from six years in Bedlam, from madness to health, from death-hunger to life. Its movement upward is a jagged and suspenseful one, by prayer and elegies and the rejection of self-pity, by memories and sunlight, past drug addiction and recurrent despair, to recovered love and, finally, acceptance of life ("Just last week, eight dalmatians, ¾ of a lb., lined up like cord wood/each/like a/birch tree.") and acceptance of herself ("I wear an apron./My typewriter writes./It didn't break the way it warned."). The quality of her poetry is hard to catch in brief quotation. It is documentary ("my husband's good L. L. Bean hunting knife"), precise and suggestive ("On my damp summer bed I cradled my salty knees"), startling ("I was thinking of a son . . . /You! The never acquired,/the never seeded or unfastened"), ironic, dryly musical, freely rhythmic. But more of her power lies in the sure, dramatic movement of whole poems, in timing, in climax, and in naked, flayed—well, confession. And even her love poems, to her daughters and her husband, which only an actor could read aloud without a breaking voice, are made more moving by the whole of which they are parts.



Of Plays and Novels

The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising, by Günter Grass, translated from the German by Ralph Manheim (Harcourt, Brace & World. 122 pp. Hardbound, \$4.50. Paperback, \$1.95), ***Beatrice Cenci***, by Alberto Moravia, translated from the Italian by Angus Davidson (Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 187 pp. \$4.50), and ***A Raisin in the Sun and The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window***, by Lorraine Hansberry (Signet. 318 pp. Paperback, 75¢), concern variously the paradoxical position of Bertolt Brecht in modern Germany, a repellent sixteenth-century Italian crime, and contemporary American social problems. Brooks Atkinson was for long drama critic of *The New York Times*.

By BROOKS ATKINSON

AS ORIGINALLY planned, the following comments were to be confined to plays by novelists. Since the play by one of the novelists (Saul Bellow) has not yet leaped fully armed from the press, two plays by Lorraine Hansberry were substituted; and that has made all the difference. For *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* and *A Raisin in the Sun* preserve in book form the pithy talents of a genuine playwright. They make Günter Grass's *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising* and Alberto Mo-

ravia's *Beatrice Cenci* seem like school-room exercises that have a certain formal felicity but lack the energy of theater. Just about anything can be acted, especially if Peter Brook is interested and available; and the plays by Mr. Grass and Mr. Moravia can be put on the stage. But the theater will have to supply the undercurrents of life that the dialogue does not tap. It is difficult for a reader to find in these plays anything beyond the cool and tidy composition of practiced novelists.

In the case of *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising* the flatness of the total impression is surprising. Mr. Grass has not only a piquant theme but also enough intellectual agility to appreciate its ramifications. He is writing about the irony—the tragic irony—of Bertolt Brecht's situation during the rising of the masses in East Berlin in 1953. According to Mr. Grass's play, Brecht was rehearsing his version of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* at the moment when the proletarian workers were revolting—not against the upper classes, as in Shakespeare's play, but against a proletarian government. After having made a career out of advocating the freedom of the masses, Brecht in the end took the side of the oppressors in order to defend his privileged position as a writer and the security of his state-supported theater.

Mr. Grass describes his play as "a German tragedy," which, course, it is. But the central idea is also maliciously entertaining. Having turned full circle, the revolution has now developed a rul-

ing class with a vested interest in the discipline of the masses, and Brecht sides with the rulers. Shakespeare did not have to face this problem. He had always been on the side of order. In a long and sardonic preface Mr. Grass says that in *Coriolanus* Shakespeare was warning King James and the nobles about the rise of the artisans and the common people. I doubt that Shakespeare wrote plays for political reasons. He was frequently concerned with topical situations, but, as I read him, he was primarily interested in writing plays that would suit his fellow actors and attract audiences. Although his sympathies were broad and deep, he was never one of the Englishmen who could give advice to the government or concern themselves with policies.

Mr. Grass's preface, which consists of an address he gave in Berlin on the quatercentenary of Shakespeare's birth, is so trenchant and knowing that his play comes as an anticlimax; it seems to say in a clumsy way what he has just said brilliantly. While *The Boss* (Brecht) is rehearsing his version of *Coriolanus* and discussing with his subordinates the changes that have to be made in Shakespeare's text, some masons and plasterers burst into the theater and ask him to support their rebellion. Since he has the reputation of being a spokesman for the masses they ask him to write their manifesto. The Boss appreciates the dramatic spectacle of a rebellion; he sees it in terms of the theater and the current rehearsal. But one political revolution has been enough for him. He equivocates long enough to avoid involvement in a situation that might jeopardize his position.

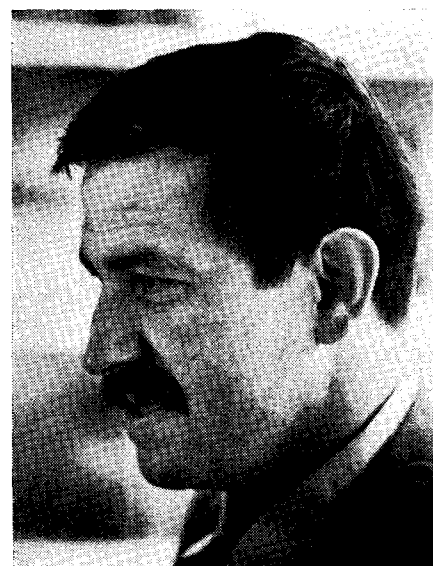
Although Ralph Manheim's English translation seems wholly satisfactory we have to consider that it may not do full justice to the original. Something may have been lost, as something is always



Alberto Moravia—a curious impulse.



Lorraine Hansberry—an illumination.



Günter Grass—a surprising impression.