

To Each Man His Own Metaphor

Poets on Poetry, edited by Howard Nemerov (Basic Books. 250 pp. \$4.95), contains comments by nineteen writers on questions of form, content, criticism, and the meaning of their craft. "Bygones" is the latest book by the noted poet and anthologist Louis Untermeyer.

By LOUIS UNTERMEYER

DURING the year that he was Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress, Howard Nemerov tried to find out what American poets thought of their own poetry and, perhaps, poetry in general. To this end he submitted four questions to twenty-one poets, only three of whom failed to reply. The poets, rather arbitrarily selected, who responded were Conrad Aiken, Marianne Moore, Richard Eberhart, J. V. Cunningham, Ben Belitt, Barbara Howes, John Malcolm Brinnin, John Berryman, Jack Gilbert, Vassar Miller, Robert Duncan, May Swenson, Richard Wilbur, Gregory Corso, William Jay Smith, Reed Whittemore, Theodore Weiss, and James Dickey, supplemented by Nemerov himself. The four questions were:

1. Do you see your work as having essentially changed in character or style since you began?
2. Is there, has there been, was there ever, a "revolution" in poetry, or is all that a matter of a few sleazy technical tricks? What is the relation of your work to this question, if there is a relation?
3. Does the question whether the world has changed during this century preoccupy you in poetry? Does your work appear to you to envision the appearance of a new human nature, for better or worse, or does it view the many and obvious changes as essentially technological?
4. What is the proper function of criticism? Is there a species of it that you admire (are able to get along with)?

The responses, including examples of the poets' works as well as their particular predilections, now appear in *Poets on Poetry*, a set of interesting if uneven essays. The essays circle uncertainly around the questions of form, of content, of criticism, and that infinitely arguable topic: the meaning of poetry. Few

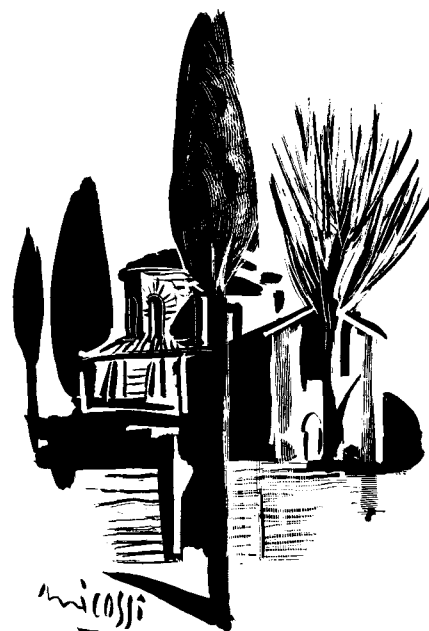
of the replies are explicit. Some rely on accepted generalities; some are obliquely self-conscious; two or three are naïvely self-centered.

What of the interrogations, what does one receive as a result, and what does one remember of the diverse and often all-too-discursive answers? The best of the book is not in the composite and often contradictory conclusions, but in a scatterwork of obiter dicta, a few packed sentences, a witty disposal, a personal revelation.

If the reader is not too captious or too impatient, he will encounter many pleasant surprises. He will be rewarded by remarks sometimes out of context but not out of character. Marianne Moore, for example, says: "Poetry is a magic of pauses. . . . Conscious writing can be the death of poetry." J. V. Cunningham: ". . . formalism adds another principle of value, for the aim of the formal is the definitive. A poem, then, on this view is metrical speech, and a good poem is the definitive statement in meter of something worth saying." Richard Wilbur: "There are risks of corruption . . . in becoming a poet-citizen rather than an alienated artist, but I myself would consider them risks well taken, because it seems to me that poetry is sterile unless it arises from a sense of community or, at least, from the hope of community." John Malcolm Brinnin: "By its nature, poetry is a groping toward clarity and definition rather than a statement of something arrived at and comfortably accepted. . . . Poets cannot save the world, but they can contribute to the civilizing process that might make the world more worthy of salvation. . . . The greatest need we all have, I think, is to keep alive the sense of wonder that will enable us to overcome the brutalizing forces of expediency and conformity in the mass societies of which we are a part." May Swenson: "The experience of poetry is to suppose that there is a moon of the psyche, let us say, whose illuminated half is familiar to our ordinary eye, but which has another hemisphere which is dark; and that poetry can discover this *other side*. . . . Science and poetry are alike, or allied, it seems to me, in their largest and main target—to investigate any and all phenomena of existence beyond the flat surface of appearances."

There are inevitable discords. Jack Gilbert: "If the academic poets often seem to be doing something very well

that isn't worth doing at all, these others [the Beats and the Black Mountain and New York groups] tend to deal with matters of real importance with slovenliness. Moreover, they usually treat fairly rudimentary ideas as great profundity. The academics spend their art on fashioning a mechanical lily; the alternate faction usually is busy discovering that a rose is a rose is a rose." Howard Nemerov: ". . . along with many others I learned from William Empson to value ambiguity; it was part of our purposeful labor, in those days, to fill our poems with somewhat studied puns which could be said to 'work on several different levels'. . . I now regard simplicity and the appearance of ease in the measure as primary values, and the detachment of a single thought from its



ambiguous surroundings as a worthier object than the deliberate cultivation of ambiguity." Conrad Aiken: ". . . at this point [1925] and for the next thirty years the best poetry written in English was American. In fact, I think it has remained so since. English poetry, in a sense, had moved to America."

IT IS Aiken who supplies the most satisfactory as well as the most affirmative summing up of a mixed set of opinions. "Poetry," he says, "has always kept easily abreast with the utmost man can do in extending the horizon of his consciousness, whether outward or inward. . . . Whether it is a change in his conception of the heavens, or of the law of gravity, or of morality, or of the nature of consciousness, it has always at last been in poetry that man has given his thought its supreme expression. . . ." This, for nonpoets as well as practicing bards, might well serve as first and last words on that ever-controversial subject: the purpose and pursuit of poetry.

Never Pet a Turtle

By ALICE DALGLIESH

DURING the year 1965, more than 2,800 children's books were published, among them many about animals, wild and pet. There were a number of books about birds sitting on people's heads, or having broken legs or wings and being nursed back to health with the greatest of ease. Vincent Nuccera's *Pigeon on My Head* has an alluring title, but head-sitting by pigeons is not to be encouraged any more than statue-sitting. With so many books available, one can be selective, and several recent medical warnings have been issued about pigeons and small turtles being carriers of *salmonella*. Better just look at turtles, not carry them around and kiss them, as children seem to do. Controlled affection is also healthier for the turtle. Publishers will probably soon be keeping lists of animals that transmit diseases to humans but can be kept if not handled.

Also to be avoided are the hastily written books by those who have learned that children like stories about animals. There are as well the books by sentimentalists, and by scientists who grow livid over anthropomorphism, which pleases small children and is an essential part of many fables and folktales.

My favorite example, however, of going too far in humanizing animals is a book that begins, "Mr. Worm got up one morning and shaved himself carefully. . . ." It's preferable to take a middle-of-the-road course—or we'd have to rule out such informal and amusing books as George Laycock's *Never Pet a Porcupine* and *Never Trust a Cowbird* (Norton).

Fireflies and Monarch butterflies have had much attention and are getting more of it. I am glad to know that scientists are studying the "cold light" of fireflies for a reason, but I also hope the light-givers won't be studied out of existence. Surely by now the scientists know enough about the light of fireflies and the migrations of Monarch butterflies so that these do not have to be caught by thousands of children, or banded, as are the Monarchs.

We have always been ambivalent to an extraordinary extent about creatures. Poems about mice are so numerous that it must be tragic for children to see a mouse caught in a trap or poisoned. Perhaps being sorry for mice has to be an accepted part of life, especially as

artists also love them—they are so pretty in pictures. Think what Beni Montresor did with Mary Stolz's *Asa and Rambo*; we'll welcome them in another book later in the spring.

This is not only the Year of the Horse for the Chinese, but the centennial of Beatrix Potter, whose diary Warne will publish sometime this spring. Her books have become almost a cult, especially in America; I do not believe that even the crustiest opponent of personalized stories about animals would deny his children the fellowship of Peter Rabbit, Benjamin Bunny, and Tom Kitten. Peter wears a little blue coat and takes camomile tea, but in his nature he is very much a rabbit.

THIS seems the place to say that I really do not have the time to "find" books for readers of *SR*, especially if nothing but the title is given. I am most sympathetic about it because the books

Henrietta. *Story and pictures by Boris Drucker. Abelard-Schuman* 32 pp. \$2.75. This is a slight but amusing story of a cartoonlike cat that is always in trouble. The text is recommended for children three and up, and I think it really is suitable for the very young ones. The pictures are in gray, black, and very bright red. But are those fish in the fishbowl swordfish? They look like goldfish. Perhaps they are swordfish as seen through Henrietta's eyes.

Fox and the Fire. *By Miska Miles. Illustrated by John Schoenherr. Atlantic-Little, Brown*, 44 pp. \$3.50. The author of *Mississippi Possum* has given us another book with a dual purpose. The possum book was both a sympathetic treatment of an animal and a picture of a flood in which a family and an animal share food and shelter. Now we have an endearing book about a much-hunted and much-maligned animal, plus the devastation wrought by a forest fire. This fox is true to his nature; when hungry he raids the barnyard. Good pictures. Ages 7-11. (7-10?)

Pascal and the Lioness. *By René Guillot. Illustrated by Barry Wilkinson. Translated and adapted by Christina Holyoak. McGraw-Hill*. 50 pp. \$2.25. René Guillot is a winner of the Hans Christian Andersen award for his well-known books in French with French or African settings. This one was translated in England, but how refreshing it is that Pascal's parents are referred to as *Maman* and *Papa* instead of Mummy (or Mommy) and Daddy. Just such a small touch keeps the child French, as we would like him to be. A pleasant story in the vein

loved in childhood have such an aura in later years. For a long time I have wanted to reread an English book entitled *Dearlove*, about a little girl whose real name was Philomena and whose lower lip "looked as though it had been newly stung by a bee." This is all I know about it, plus its Channel Islands setting, but that is not enough information even for professional book-finders.

I am sorry, too, that I cannot read manuscripts of books for children and recommend a publisher. Stamped, self-addressed envelopes are seldom enclosed. Even if they are, manuscripts do get divorced from them; it's astonishing that writers do not value their manuscripts enough to write their names on them. I've kept one about a personalized peanut for several years, hoping that the author would ask for its return, but she hasn't. And who owns a set of plays for radio written (I hope with permission) from children's books? The first play is *Richard Brown and the Dragon*, from a story by Robert Bright.

The advent of what is known as "The New English" results in requests for lists of "classics" for children of various ages and various school grades. I can't make individual lists, but I shall try to say something about "The New English" in *BOOKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE* next month.

of *Elsa* except that the animals talk to each other. Ages 7-10.

Flash: The Life Story of a Firefly. *By Louise Dyer Harris and Norman Dyer Harris. Illustrated by Henry B. Kane. Little, Brown*. 57 pp. \$2.95. This book is attractive in format, interesting in text; its color pictures provide an opportunity to present the firefly's light. However, an exciting life story does not need exclamation points to carry it along. There are occasional examples of writing down to children—"Raindrops are going plop! plop!" "As Flash goes places he looks like a teeny-weeny freight car."—though not enough to keep the book from "going places." Ages 6 up.

Monarch Butterflies. *By Alice L. Hopf. Illustrated by Peter Burchard. Crowell*. 134 pp. \$3.75. A knowledgeable book, this begins with a costume parade by the children of Pacific Grove, Calif., to mark the arrival of the butterflies that are of such interest because of their beauty and migratory pattern. No one really knows why they have selected this particular grove of trees as a way station, but they fly from Canada apparently as far as Texas and Florida. In Pacific Grove they are protected, although not, so it seems, in other places.

Dr. Urquhart of the University of Toronto has done the most work in banding these butterflies and studying their migrations. Since they lay their eggs on milkweed, it is to be hoped that the bulldozers will spare milkweed plants in some of the places on their routes. Also that young people will be careful in banding the butterflies, if band they must. As suggested in this book, it