

MYTH ON MEDITERRANEAN BEACH

Venus Anadyomene as Logos

By ROBERT PENN WARREN

FROM left to right, she leads the eye
Across the blaze-brightness of sea and sky

That is the background of her transit.

Commanded thus, from left to right,
As by a line of print on that bright

Blankness, the eye will follow, but

There is no line, the eye follows only
That one word moving, it moves in lonely

And absolute arrogance across the blank

Page of the world, the word burns, she is
The word, all faces turn, Look! — this

Is what she is: old hunchback in bikini.

A contraption of angles and bulges, an old
Robot with pince-nez and hair dyed gold,

She heaves along beneath the hump.

The breasts hang down like saddle-bags,
To balance the hump the belly sags,

And under the belly-bulge, the flowers

Of the gee-string garland the private parts.
She grinds along by fits and starts

Beside the margin of the sea,

Past children and sand-castles and
The lovers strewn along the sand.

Her pince-nez glitter like contempt

For all delusion, and the French lad
Who exhibitionistically had

Been fondling the American college girl

Loses his interest. Ignoring him,
The hunchback stares at the horizon-rim,

Then slowly, as compulsion grows,

She foots the first frail lace of foam
That is the threshold of her lost home,

And moved by memory in the blood,

Enters that vast indifference
Of perfection that we call the sea.

How long, how long she lingers there

She may not know, somnambulist
In that realm where no Time may subsist,

But in the end will again feel

The need to rise and re-enact
The miracle of the human fact.

She lifts her head, looks toward the shore.

She moves toward us, bemused and slow,
And as she moves, we watch, we know

How from the breasts the sea recedes,

How the great-gashed navel's cup
Pours forth the ichor that had filled it up,

How the wavelets sink to seek, and seek,

Then languishing sink to lave the knees,
And lower, kiss the feet, as these

Find the firm ground where they must go.

The last foam crisps about the feet.
She stands forth free. She is complete

In Botticellian parody.

Bearing her luck upon her back,
She turns now to take her lifeward track.

And lover by lover, on she moves

Toward her own truth, and does not stop.
Each foot stumps flat with the big toe up,

But under the heel, the damp-packed sand,

With that compression, like glory glows,
And glory attends her as she goes.

In rapture now she heaves along,

And the pince-nez glitter at her eyes,
And flowers wreath her moving thighs,

For she treads the track the blessed know

To a shore far lonelier than this
Where waits her apotheosis.

She passes the lovers, one by one,

And passing draws their dreams away,
And leaves them naked to the day.

Robert Penn Warren recently was announced as the
winner of the 1967 Bollingen Prize in Poetry.



Books

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LITERARY HORIZONS

The Best of Many Lives

ON JUNE 2, 1947, Gladys Billings married Van Wyck Brooks. In *If Strangers Meet* (Harcourt, Brace & World, \$6.95) Mrs. Brooks writes: "We were both vulnerable at that moment in time, our lives hanging between past and future while loneliness wrapped us each like some dull mist. He was alone because of Eleanor's death; I was alone in consequence of a recently and unhappily established divorce." (The first Mrs. Van Wyck Brooks had died in 1946.) Not long after the marriage *The Times of Melville and Whitman*, fourth volume of Brooks's history of the literary life in America, was published, and from then until 1952 he worked on the concluding volume, *The Confident Years*. Thereafter he wrote a number of shorter books, including sketches of John Sloan and Helen Keller, a biography of William Dean Howells, autobiographical volumes, and critical essays.

During the years of the marriage Mrs. Brooks, who was not young and who had already demonstrated a variety of talents, turned author, publishing *Three Wise Virgins*, studies of a trio of New England ladies of independent spirit and philanthropic inclination. It became clear that she was a born writer, and she went on writing. Her first autobiographical volume, *Gramercy Park* (1958), is a charming account of a girlhood in New York City near the turn of the century. Daughter of a prosperous doctor and a semi-invalid mother with broad cultural interests, Gladys saw more sides of life than most of her contemporaries, and looked carefully at all that she saw. Telling about her parents' disagreements with regard to the nature of the good life, she comments, "I knew I had to explore everything in order to find out which world was best."

Boston and Return (1962) describes some of her explorations, and describes them very well. After a rather informal education, partly conducted in Europe, Miss Rice, as she then was, decided to become a landscape gardener, and, with a friend, went to study at the Arnold

Arboretum in Boston under the famous and, so far as she was concerned, skeptical Professor Sargent. Her account of her experience will delight anyone who cares for trees and shrubs. Then there was Europe again and a meeting with Henry Adams, who enrolled her among his "nieces." Marrying John Saltonstall, she set up housekeeping, so to speak, on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston with six servants. She found the life of proper Boston society oppressive, but there were music and painting, trips to Europe, and eventually four children to occupy her attention. The period from 1890 to 1914 or perhaps 1917 was, I believe, a peculiarly pleasant time for a rather large number of privileged persons; certainly, though she had her problems, Gladys Rice Saltonstall enjoyed it.

Passing over a decade or two and a second marriage, Mrs. Brooks begins *If Strangers Meet* with an account of her first meeting with Van Wyck. "I saw a man of medium height," she writes, "of medium weight, dressed in a well-cut, discreet English suit with short jacket, handkerchief neatly folded in breast pocket, his thick black hair brushed back to stand straight up from his forehead, his color high in a face almost without lines and bearing the distinctive feature of a white mustache, which he wore clipped." As the description suggests, his manner was rather formal though always gracious, and the formality went along with a certain shyness. He was not lacking in self-assurance, nor did he underestimate his own powers, but he had never been one to thrust himself forward, and fame seemed to increase rather than diminish his reticence.

The marriage lasted for nearly sixteen years, until Brooks's death in 1963, in his seventy-eighth year. Mrs. Brooks has given a careful account of the later years of a distinguished man of letters. Always an extraordinarily hard worker, Brooks found it difficult to break the habit, even when his fame and his income, to say nothing of age and uncertain health, suggested a less stringent discipline. Al-

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though in 1952 he had finished his great work, the "Makers and Finders" series, and had laurels aplenty to rest on, he continued to spend many hours each day in his study. But of course there were interruptions—travels in this country and in Europe, increasingly frequent occasions when honors were bestowed upon him, and visits to and from friends of a long lifetime. Dozens of more or less eminent poets, novelists, critics, and artists of all sorts are mentioned in Mrs. Brooks's faithful record, and some of them are shown with admirable vividness. Because it is a conscientious account of the Brookses' activities, the book is less enjoyable than the more impressionistic *Boston and Return*; but surely it was Mrs. Brooks's primary duty to set down such a chronicle.

The years described in the book were those in which Van Wyck Brooks found public recognition for a lifetime of devotion to American literature; but they were also years in which, to his dismay, he was repudiated by many gifted members of a younger generation. To begin with, he had been highly regarded as a rebel, a leader of the attack on Philistinism and the values of a business civiliza-