

*A HOPE FOR POETRY*, by C. Day Lewis (*Basil Blackwell*, 6/-).

This book is not what it is stated to be by the author—‘an examination of post-war poetry.’ That is to say, the poems of the writers in question are not critically weighed, the good is not sifted from the bad, and the quality of their success or failure is not determined. On the contrary, the author starts from the conviction that at least two of his subjects are ‘true poets’ and goes on to discuss where the various dodges (assonance, elliptic construction, etc.) to be found in their verse were first used. This involves him in a sketch of literary history since the Romantic movement and an account of the contemporary situation from a political as well as a literary point of view. The information he offers is not (as the author himself admits) new to those already interested in contemporary poetry and familiar with current criticism. The book is aimed deliberately at a different audience.

‘Similarly, with post-war verse, the intelligent but untutored reader is apt to admit himself quite baffled at the start: at the same time he is often interested and excited by individual images, and feels that, if only he had one clue, he would be able to make his way quite easily through the labyrinth. The object of this book being largely to persuade the prospective reader, and not to freeze him with assumptions of his mental inadequacy, I hope later to indicate some general clues which may be of assistance. He may feel reassured to know that poets are doing their best now to bridge the gulf from their side, and he does not need to be told that true poetry, however it may appear on the surface, accumulates meaning every time it is read.’

In the effort to bridge this gulf and respect at the same time the level of his audience, the author found himself compelled to write passages like the following:

‘Unfortunately, Prufrock, as we have seen, became posh. And this did not do his children any good: and they were irritated at being flattered by their father’s virtues, and they did not care for basking in the arc-light of his publicity. There is little wonder that, in consequence, although they retained their respect for him and certain of his characteristics and mannerisms, they began to make up a private language of their own in self-defence, to become hearty, to play practical jokes, to hob-nob with social revolution-

aries, and in general to assert their individuality. Before long they were highly disconcerted to find that they too had become posh. At this point the joke had clearly gone too far: and we may return to plain speaking.'

And to his credit Mr. Day Lewis shows himself completely aware of the nature of the 'boom' in his sort of poetry, the collapse of a reading public—in short of the general contemporary plight so painfully familiar to readers of *Scrutiny*. In the face of increasing popularity (it has swept from the Continent to America) he points out the more obvious shortcomings in his own and his colleagues' (in the Trinity) verse.

Granted, then, that he is not primarily addressing a fashionable public and that his audience is at once 'tougher' and less lettered, of what use are the references to literary sources? For such of these poets who are Communists the only adequate audience is the proletariat to whom at the moment bourgeois literary history is a closed book. As a revolutionary handbook I cannot imagine that *A Hope for Poetry* would have much success. The peculiar problems of the revolutionary poet, for example, the relation of poetry to beliefs, the relation of the 'man' to the 'poet,' are not, considering the amount of discussion these topics have received in recent years, satisfactorily treated. But that section of the Communist party which is bourgeois in origin and has received only a vague literary training—say, the University level—will find this book extraordinarily sympathetic.

But even these, it seems to me, will derive but little profit from the part of this book which deals with technique. For the very method of the book stands in the way. If technique to be important must be 'a matter of delicate response to inner pressure,' no useful discussion of it can be made out of its context in particular poems. The author, however, again and again seems to imply that the various devices to be found in post-war poetry are not present owing to such pressure but are merely attempts to *freshen up the language*.

'The search for methods for restoring freshness to words contributes to the obscurity of post-war poetry. Poets have gone back to old grammatical usages, and have taken new grammatical licences. We notice, for example, the omission of the relative pronoun and the article, the qualification of nouns by adverbs,

the transposition of the adjective, inversion, and the frequent employment of elliptic constructions. Where Auden's earlier poems are obscure, it is due much more often to an elliptic use of language than to any confusion of the thought or non-conductivity of the images.'

This view of technique is more clearly defined when it is seen in contrast with poetry which is likened among many other things to a Spirit which descends at rare intervals between which the poet busies himself with internal rhymes and assonances. And 'the fact,' says Mr. Day Lewis, 'of such widespread experimentation is some indication of poetry being in a healthy and hopeful state.' But surely it is in these very visitations that new techniques are forged.

It is perhaps disappointing that the author who is, after all, one of the foremost names in the group, and in a position to give us inside information, should content himself with going over old ground, and ground which critics not so well placed can cover with equal if not more advantage. An account of the development of the movement before and after the 'programme' in *Oxford Poetry* 1927 would have more than a biographical importance. But as it is, whereas undoubtedly the various items are decently but not brilliantly set forth, the precise utility of the display is not so obvious.

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*MODERN PROSE STYLE*, by Bonamy Dobrée (Milford, Clarendon Press, 6/-).

Mr. Dobrée states in his preface that this book 'is meant for anybody who takes lay interest in writing, who might perhaps be helped to understand why he likes some authors better than others; it is in fact meant for those who have never thought much about writing, but like it for its own sake, as well as for what it conveys.' If we do not enquire too closely into the meaning of these last words, the aim may be accepted with interest; Mr. Dobrée is writing for a reader of natural, but untrained, intelligence, who is willing to listen to someone of experience.

However, the rest of the book is completely disappointing, except for the representative range of examples. Here, at least, Mr. Dobrée is thorough, but his comments on the examples