

## A PUBLIC FOR POETRY

*JANUS*, by George Barker (*Faber and Faber*, 7/6).

*POEMS*, by Louis Macneice (*Faber and Faber*, 6/-).

The poetry-reading public that, we are often assured, exists to-day must have remarkably catholic tastes if it is able to bracket Messrs. Barker and Macneice together as signs of the poetic renaissance (included in the bracket are, I suppose, the usual names—Auden, Spender, Day Lewis and, perhaps, Bottrall). It is not a question here of the true poetry-enthusiast being able to stomach one kind of poetry, though such accusations are frequent; it is a question of the great difference in the quality of these two authors. Yet, judging by what one reads, Mr. Barker has been received as favourably, at least, as Mr. Macneice—such is the desperate anxiety of reviewers to be in the swim. It should be pointed out here that *Janus* is written in prose, but as it is that type of prose usually known as 'poetic' and as Mr. Barker is known mainly as a poet, I do not think that any injustice is done in including it in a review of poetry.

*Janus* consists of two fragments on Love and Death. We are informed by the 'blurb' that 'Mr. Barker is coming to be accepted as the Keats' of this time and that the stories are told 'in a form of prose which Mr. Barker has invented, unprecedented.' Now, I have gratitude and admiration for Messrs. Faber, but, without going into the question of who accepts Mr. Barker as the new Keats, I must say that this is a bit too thick. I should like to ask the writer in what possible way of thought, style, or relation to his age Keats resembles Mr. Barker either in poetry or prose. Has the writer ever read Keats' letters? And is Keats, even in the worst parts of *Endymion* and *Isabella*, ever so helplessly aimless and neurotic as Mr. Barker's central character? About this character there may linger reminiscences of the pernicious 'Johnny Keats' legend, but resemblance goes no nearer. And the unprecedented prose seems a farrago of influences ranging from the Oscar Wilde of *Salome* to some blundering imitations of Mr. Empson being ambiguous.

On the question of Mr. Barker's subject matter, I find myself driven into line with the school of critics who maintain that literature too much divorced from social realities is worthless. This

does not prevent me from finding Mr. Macneice's poems very pleasing, for he is aware of the implications of his attitude and accepts them. But, with so many more urgent subjects at hand, I cannot be interested in the constant twiddling of the very unpleasant mind of Mr. Barker's hero, who displays practically the same characteristics in each story. We are led to believe that he is a sexual pervert, mentally unbalanced, and somewhat of a masochist. It needs the genius of a Dostoevsky to make such matters seem of vital importance.

Mr. Barker is aware of some of the criticisms that will be made. I don't know whether this is a virtue or a fault. It betrays his indecision, and seems to show that even he, himself, does not believe, altogether in what he is doing.—' "Is this," I overhear, "the garrulity of the autobiographer, or the pretentious and dull soliloquising of the monologue novel?" " And I respect the query and proffer retort".'

Yet the retort is so unsatisfactory that he is obliged to repeat the question a little later.

The second fragment *The Bacchant* is slightly preferable to the first. It is just as hysterical, but there seems to be some trace of a not insincere emotion.

And, lastly, here is a typical sample of the prose that readers may make their own estimate.

' One, being loved, embezzled my vitality, took from under my heart the actual foundations of my being, and in return, rendering no ineradicable nectarine kiss (the desire for which I cannot ever obliterate from my imagination), left me here to lie, discarded, in the confines of my body's cell and, attempting to recapture his presence, only ineffectually, only tormentingly, recapture.'

Mr. Macneice is not a great poet—in these days of superlatives, it is, perhaps, necessary to state this—but, to me, he is far more pleasing than many better-known contemporary poets. He has the great virtue of being entirely unaffected which, especially in view of the attitude he takes, is a definite achievement. He is what the unsympathetic might call a dilettante, and he is quite aware of this. He is also aware of the complicated social background of the time, and of the isolation which it imposes, of necessity, on a man

who finds his greatest delight in what so many consider the surface things of life—not only those things which must remain the same whatever social upheaval may take place, but in the sensual impressions that are a direct result of contemporary conditions.

But yet there is beauty narcotic and deciduous  
In this vast organism grown out of us ;  
On all the traffic-islands stand white globes like moons,  
The city's haze is clouded amber that purrs and croons,  
And tilting by the noble curve bus after tall bus comes  
With an osculation of yellow light, with a glory like  
chrysanthemums.

These lines are not typical of Mr. Macneice at his best—the fourth line is rather reminiscent of Miss Sitwell, and there are other instances of the same thing—but the poem in which they occur *An Eclogue for Christmas*, is one of the best in the book in its poise and honesty. For Mr. Macneice is not ashamed to confess pleasure, even where he knows it to be inferior, and is thus superior to many who will not admit questionable partialities for fear of damaging their status.

He does not find it necessary to be bitter or savage about the Communists, who, he knows, must, inevitably destroy him and his like, though he is mildly ironical in *To a Communist* and *Turf-stacks*. Yet, at the same time, his attitude is his weakness ; his lack of adequate centre gives a slight air of floppiness even to his best work, and makes several of the poems seem unnecessarily trivial. One of the best, *The Individualist Speaks* summarises the whole attitude well. He has a good eye for visual images and has produced in *Morning Sun* and others, some of the best purely descriptive poetry of recent years, though even here we feel it loses by being attached to nothing. A typical poem, *A Contact*, may be quoted—it appears to be a variation on Laforgue's

' *Oh, qu'ils sont pittoresques, les trains manqués.*'

The trains pass and the trains pass, chains of lighted  
windows.

A register in an unknown language

For these are the trains in which one never goes.

The familiar rhythm but the unknown implications  
 Delight like a dead language  
 Which never shocks us by banal revelations.

So listening for the night express coming down the way  
 I receive the expected whistle of the engine  
 Sharp and straight on the ear like stigmata.

It is by no means the best poem in the book, but it is certainly typical.

The second verse seems to me to provide a wholly successful image, though the ending seems to lose this spontaneity. Mr. Macneice has a command of rhythm, which never becomes, in his hands either facile or crabbed. Even his worst poems almost deceive us at a first reading, for this reason.

It is always more easy to point out the defects of an author than to show his merits, and I feel I may have praised Mr. Macneice, without giving sufficient proof ; in any case, it would be a pity for anyone interested in poetry not to read him.

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## WILLIAM EMPSON'S VERSE

*POEMS*, by William Empson (Chatto & Windus, 6/-).

Publishers in recent years have been generous towards poets. The young aspirant has hardly finished his apprenticeship before he is encouraged to come before the public with a collection of poems. It has been peculiarly exasperating that the work of one of the most interesting of contemporary poets has remained hidden in the comparative obscurity of the 1928 files of the *Cambridge Review* and in undergraduate journals of that period now extinct. Messrs. Chatto & Windus have done the public a service in making these poems generally accessible. It is now possible to see on what evidence the general high estimate rests. We have the greater part of these earlier poems revised and polished, together with those written more recently.

Great things have been said of Mr. Empson. The dust-cover reminds one that in *New Bearings* he was singled out with one other