

other people. I could now phrase this more intelligibly, perhaps, by saying that *The Turn of the Screw* is ingeniously calculated to exploit, albeit in a perverse way, that native pragmatic bent which pre-eminently characterizes, above all others, the American sensibility. One value at least I hope will be conceded to my reading of *The Turn of the Screw*: Pragmatism is said to be the most amiable of philosophies, but I think my conception of the Governess may suggest that it is also capable of proving a very nasty spoonful of bitters indeed, a veritable 'excursion into chaos'.

MARIUS BEWLEY.

COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

ASPECTS OF MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

I.

Mr. B. Rajan's *Focus Number Five: Modern American Poetry*¹ ends with the answers given by a number of American poets to a questionnaire which he had sent them. The questions deal with American poetry, how it is to be distinguished from English poetry, whether its 'vocabulary, metric, cadences, syntax, punctuation differs notably from that of English poetry?' and so on. Such questions do not get one very far, and it is even possible that they may discourage one from going farther and asking more important questions. And yet such questions are not pointless either, for they lead into considerations of the relationship of the poet with his particular tradition. To quote from a non-contemporary work, *Gertrude of Wyoming*:

Delightful Wyoming! beneath thy skies
The happy shepherd swains had nought to do
But feed their flocks on green declivities
Or skim perchance thy lake with light canoe.

One feels safe in assuming that an American poet did not write that, and the observation is not irrelevant. It is closely associated with an appreciation of the quality of the verse itself. But the question of what constitutes an American poet *can* be a red herring that leads us into considerations of the typical rather than of the essential and the unique. Nearly all the poets whose answers are recorded here are fully aware of this fact, but yet not very much of interest emerges from their collective answers.

¹Dennis Dobson Ltd., 8/6.

And yet there does seem to be a significant difference between the American and English situations in poetry at present—a difference that cannot be defined by such considerations as subject, vocabulary, syntax, and punctuation. This difference lies, I believe, in different conceptions of what the function of a poet in society is. I do not necessarily mean the consciously held idea, but the function that is involuntarily served when the poet is actually practising his art. About a year ago I asked a well known young American poet what he thought the relation between an American poet and America ought to be, and he replied: 'To try and understand the sources of America's energy, and effect some relation between them and one's art'. About six months later I asked a much better known British poet what his idea of the relationship between the English poet and England ought to be, and he replied: 'To get out of her as soon as possible, and stay out as long as possible'. The reply of the American may be taken as pretty representative. Whether the English poet's reply is an extreme instance or not, it is perhaps not for me to say. But it does point to a situation or state in English poetry that is undeniable—a state which Mr. Cyril Connolly described for an American audience as one of 'exhaustion'.

In order to understand the nature of the 'energy' in modern American poetry (I am speaking here only of its existence; whether it is well used or not is another question) which is the distinguishing mark that differentiates it from English poetry, one had better begin by examining the state of poetry in England to-day.

The tradition of poetry flows unevenly, and at times dwindles, not even to a tiny trickle, but to a series of little stagnant ponds in which all life appears on the point of expiring. The reason seems to be that at infrequently spaced intervals a generation of poets is born who mobilizes speech and energy in such quantities and under such new aspects that the poets who occur between two such periods depend largely on the idiom and modes of feeling developed by their predecessors to express their own ideas. This is not usually owing to the lack of original talent in the later poets, but to the fact that the sensibility of the age has not yet changed sufficiently to justify that modification which an original poet must impose on old forms. The time has not yet developed those new requirements and urgencies which would make any such modifications intelligible to any envisaged public, or even to the poet himself. For if poets create the speech of their time, they cannot create it out of improper materials. They have to await the moment at which creation becomes possible. So it happens that poets, however considerable their own talents, may sometimes be confined to areas of speech and feeling from which no egress appears possible, and they appear wholly derivative or uninteresting who in a more felicitous and formative time might well have shown with greater originality and lustre.

The undeniable desiccation of English poetry to-day, while it may partly spring from causes that appear remediable, is also part of a larger historical cycle. To-day it sometimes appears that

English poetry has entered into one of those periods of extreme aridity and discouragement during which most signs of vitality are destined to be proved either hopeless or bogus. Trapped in their time, English poets have not been able to evolve new forms because the time has not yet provided a basis for new speech. The moment at which an original new poet may arrive may be within a month, or it may be two generations off. All we know is that he has not yet arrived.

The American scene in poetry is distinguished from the English scene chiefly in this sense of function which its poets have. If, in view of the quality of much of their work, the conviction seems a little naïve, I am trying to point here to an attitude, a psychological situation, rather than offer a critical examination of the individual writers. This conviction of function, of important work to do, arises first of all from the material circumstances of American life, its overwhelming activity on every side, its mere physical appearance of bustle and directed energy. Since the War there has been an intensification of the desire to explore and define American experience, not in itself only, but in its relations with the world. And the fact that the American poet, unlike the English poet, is not inclined to resent his present government, permits him to feel functionally associated with that experience. What the vast horde of American poets mean by American experience is, of course, something that cannot safely be generalized about for more than one poet at a time, but all the poets have this—and this only—in common; each is aware that his own experience is American, and the sense of it gives him confidence and a feeling that what he has to say is important. The result may often be extremely bad poetry, but it is something very different from exhaustion. For example, opening Mr. Rajan's anthology to its first selection, one comes on a poem by Mr. James Laughlin, the editor of *New Directions*, which I am tempted to quote entire because I cannot quite imagine the attitude expressed in it transposed over into the English scene under any circumstances whatever, and it illustrates in a disarmingly frank-faced manner the attitude I have been speaking of, even to its title, 'Go West Young Man':

Yessir they're all named
either Ken or Stan or Don
every one of them and

those aren't just nick-
names either no they're
really christened like

that just Ken or Stan or
Don and you shake hands
with anybody you run into

no matter who the hell
it is and say 'glad to
know you Ken glad to

know you Don' and then
 two minutes later (you
 may not have said ten
 words to the guy) you
 shake hands again and
 say 'glad to have met
 you Stan glad to' and
 they haven't heard much
 about Marx and the class
 struggle because they
 haven't had to and by
 god it makes a country
 that is fit to live in
 and by god I'm glad to
 know you Don I'm glad!

Whatever one might say about a piece like that, it does rest amazingly secure in its sense of the goodness of its own experience. It shows no doubts. Like a great deal of American writing, it is pure and emphatic assertion. Whether it has logic or not, it has a good deal of will in its make-up, and one is really surprised at the strength of the conviction behind it. Now these elements that are so apparent here—security and faith in its own experience (whatever that experience may be), a reliance on will and assertion, and a feeling that it is pretty important, are the most reliable signs by which to identify an American poem to-day. They are not infallible, but they are better signs than syntax, vocabulary and rhythm. They rarely exist as openly and simply as in 'Go West Young Man'. Sometimes the disguise is very deep indeed, but under whatever tropical growth of cynicism or tortuous self-questionings the poet may hide, if one listens carefully enough the voice of the American is heard at last expressing his satisfaction in his own being. To take a very straightforward example of this disguised security which I happen to have lying on my table at the moment, Mr. Delmore Schwartz ends a recent poem in which he carefully delineates the successive disillusionments of his life with these three verses:

Illusion and madness mock the years
 (A Godforsaken farce at best),
 And yet through all these mounting fears
 How glad I am that I exist!
 How strange the truth appears at last!
 I feel as old as outworn shoes,
 I know what I have lost or missed,
 Or certainly will some day lose,
 And yet this knowledge, like the Jews,
 Can make me glad that I exist!
 with a hey ho, the foolish past,
 and a ho ho and a ha ha at last.

Any English reader would probably have some difficulty in distinguishing this tone from the bravado of Henley, but nevertheless (and I am not thinking merely of the Elizabethan decor) it is something quite different. The attitude behind it is a reflection of an important part of American character—an ability to see-saw from cynicism into optimism and enthusiasm, and a moment later, rigorous conviction. Whatever disabilities may attend it, its chief virtue in American history is quickness of recovery. Americans could hardly get on without it, and it is therefore not to be dismissed as a merely shallow or silly or insubstantial attitude. Mr. Schwartz's poem is trivial enough, but I say all this because it is not a bad poem in the way I am fairly certain most English readers will conclude. And this attitude which is behind it—an attitude foreign to most Englishmen but indispensable to most Americans—is an important part of that larger complex of qualities which I am trying to suggest is one of the chief distinctions between the quality of English and American poetry.

But perhaps I may make my point more clearly by glancing at an article by Mr. Schwartz, 'The Grapes of Crisis', which recently appeared in *Partisan Review* (January-February, 1951). Mr. Schwartz presents in this article some evidence to suggest that since the First World War, but gaining incredible momentum since the Second, a change has been occurring in the American character—a change which is registered in American art, particularly in literature and films. New books have sorrowful titles: *Lord Weary's Castle*, *The Dispossessed*, *The Victim*, etc. New films have unhappy endings. And the Daisy Millers of American literature have given place to the nymphomaniac of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. All this Mr. Schwartz sees as evidence of a crushing disillusionment—an abandonment of traditional American optimism. But however persuasive the evidence may seem, Mr. Schwartz's own conclusions indicate that the change has so far been confined to the surface. Pointing to the cynicism which, in some respects, has overtaken the American literary scene, Mr. Schwartz accepts it as the basis for a real advance—the creation of 'the possibility of a genuinely tragic art. Nobility is quickened by tragedy and nurtured by necessity. Once the mind is capable of regarding the future with a sense of tragedy and a sense of comedy, instead of requiring the forced smiles (and the whistling in the dark) of dogmatic optimism, the awakened consciousness is prepared to respond to existence with courage and intelligence'.

Thus, the strategy of Mr. Schwartz's criticism follows the strategy of his poem, quoted above. At the last moment a joyful and unexpected reversal assures us that, in the face of grave dangers and direful recognitions, the American has come through. This is a deeper kind of optimism than the one which Mr. Schwartz has made the subject of his own paper, and it is one which I hope, and trust, will not be readily abandoned. I doubt if it can ever lead on to genuine tragic art, but it represents a valid resilience which may ward off tragedy outside the realm of art.

II.

To speak of the American sense of function, and the American poet's feeling of importance, raises other questions. To what extent is this conviction valid, and to what extent bogus? Is it leading on to the production of genuine poetry, or is it merely substituting a metrical complacency for a discriminating creative sensibility? I am raising these questions *apropos* of the whole rampant activity of American poets from Mr. William Carlos Williams to Muriel Rukeyser. Any art or any organized activity in America that attracts much attention has to contend with a kind of excited exploitation that springs from a number of motives—some of them innocent. There is the genuine American desire for magnification, and the lust for living perpetually in the shadow of crisis. The geography and tradition of America provides a legitimate basis for these urges up to a point, but the American press and publishing houses, advertisers, political propagandists, and Hollywood, have all in their own respective ways found it profitable to encourage a tendency that opens avenues to American hearts or pockets. Now the conviction of function in American poets—that quality by which I have attempted to differentiate them from contemporary English poets—when it becomes too self-conscious, is inclined to desert its valid bases, and to magnify itself disproportionately. It is inclined to keep its eye on a program—say, some new version of Walt Whitman's vision of the Republic—to spend a good deal of time in congratulating itself, and to indulge in local tempests that promote the sensation of important activity, and of being in the vanguard of events. This kind of false excitement is deliberately encouraged by publishing houses and coteries which see a profitable issue in giving a March of Time staging to some volume or other. And so it gradually happens that a conviction, or a sense of function that began as a very valid attitude and as a sign of health in American poetry is changed into a manufactured and artificially sustained excitement, and American literature is subjected to a further infiltration of the spurious. One may take an example that is conveniently at hand in the form of an advertisement from a recent *Partisan Review*—a full page notice of Mr. Peter Viereck's last book of poems, *Strike through the Mask!* After Robert Lowell, Mr. Viereck has been one of the most discussed young American poets of the past several years. I have not seen the present volume, but his first volume, *Terror and Decorum*, which aroused a great deal of enthusiasm a year ago, seemed to offer little to justify the interest. However, I do not wish to consider Mr. Viereck's poetry here, but only the artificial stimulant that this present volume has been presented with. Across the top of the *PR* page in as great letters as the format allows we read, 'PETER VIERECK AND THE INDEX PROHIBITORIUM', and then comes this passage culled from a review:

'Mr. Viereck has been sinning, and grievously, these past twelve months. He has published an article, "My Kind of Poetry",

in the *Saturday Review*, an act which constitutes trading with the enemy. Though emphatically opposed to Robert Hillyer's dim coterie, he has twice criticized the award of the 1949 Bollingen Prize to Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*. And now, the crowning insult: he has brought out a second book of poems scarcely a year after publishing *Terror and Decorum*. Either he must repent or resign himself to a prominent and permanent position in the Index Prohibitorium of the New Criticism.'

The references will not all be familiar to English readers, but the intolerably smug tone of ersatz excitement cannot be mistaken. The effect is to blur the lines between reading publics in order to insure as large a public as possible. America is very conscious of the high-low-middle brow distinctions, and with the help of *Life* (who first took the hint from *Harper's Bazaar*) made a parlour game out of them about a year ago. The references to the New Criticism and its Index Prohibitorium on the one hand, and the unsavoury *Saturday Review of Literature* on the other, gives the insidious impression that poets and critics and their audiences are divided into opposed solidarities—an impression that is no doubt useful in promoting sales and an air of electioneering excitement, but which is in every other respect insidiously simplifying.

The proposition that I began with in these notes was simply that American poets have a sense of function and responsibility whereas English poets to-day have not. Without some such sense I do not see how poetry can be written at all. It is one of the indispensable qualifications of a poet. But I have also wished to point here to the grave dangers that attend a sense of function as it is sometimes exercised in a highly competitive and commercialized society—and American literary society is all of that. The American's passion for importance, magnitude, and for asserting his own identity, frequently ends in an expansiveness of mood which, however much it may encourage an evolving sense of the nation's literary destiny, does very little to fulfill it. I believe that this atmosphere is healthier than the complete inertness which now prevails in the English scene, but to call it health would be going very far indeed.

III.

As yet I have not attempted in this paper to look at any particular American poets very closely. The great number of them who possess a fair share of reputation is itself discouraging for anyone attempting a 'survey'. But one should not be misled by mere multitude into supposing that Americans are essentially more interested in literature than the English. Although some of the details of Tocqueville's analysis of American writing have changed since he wrote *Democracy in America* over a century ago, the greater number of American poets may still be explained as the product of peculiarly democratic processes of thought which he analysed:

'Taken as a whole, literature in democratic ages can never present, as it does in the periods of aristocracy, an aspect of order, regularity, science, and art; its form will, on the contrary, ordinarily be slighted, sometimes despised. Style will frequently be fantastic, incorrect, overburdened, and loose—almost always vehement and bold. Authors will aim at rapidity of execution, more than at perfection of detail. Small productions will be more common than bulky books; there will be more wit than erudition, more imagination than profundity; and literary performances will bear marks of an untutored and rude vigour of thought—frequently of great variety and singular fecundity. The object of authors will be to astonish rather than to please, and to stir the passions more than to stir the taste. Here and there indeed, writers will doubtless occur who will choose a different track, and who will, if they are gifted with superior abilities, succeed in finding readers, in spite of their defects or their better qualities; but these exceptions will be rare, and even the authors who shall so depart from the received practice in the main subject of their works, will always relapse into it in some lesser details'.

There are ways in which this description no longer applies. For example, there is a growing emphasis on technique among American poets, and a taste for complicated metrical forms, which is replacing the older and hackneyed emphasis on experimentalism. But the passage is still true enough to indicate why being a poet comes more easily in America than in England. Many modern American poets have acquired great skill writing in intricate metrical patterns, but the complications of form which they pursue frequently seem to be achieved with facility rather than sustained with conviction or a poise that is not brittle. There is a disquieting tendency on the part of American critics to refer to these poets as 'great technicians'. I say it is disquieting because a highly ordered form in poetry ought to relate, it seems to me, to patterns of feeling and living somewhat less technological than the favoured phrase implies. I cannot imagine a seventeenth century critic reading 'Alexander's Feast' for the first time, and exclaiming: 'What a great technician Dryden is!' 'Technician', in such a context, means nothing more than 'verbal engineer', which may be why the critics of a highly technological civilization have come to favour it so much.

The 'technicians' among modern American poets may be divided into two groups. With the first group I shall not have space to deal here. These poets are concerned with expressing in a baroque verbal mode a highly sophisticated consciousness of life. They have come into special prominence since the war, no doubt regarding themselves as the young exponents of a New Decadence. But actually (though they would be horrified by the comparison) their verse goes back through Edna St. Vincent Millay to Emily Dickinson. Mr. Auden helps them conceal the fact as much as possible, but the emotional base of their 'wickedness' is little more than an amiable glamour-lapsing-into-cuteness. By far the best rep-

representative of the group (I dislike mentioning him in this connection for I consider him a very good poet) is Mr. Robert Horan, for whose single volume, *A Beginning*, one has a genuine regard. The criticisms I have made of this group of poets apply to him mainly as a warning, but it is asking rather much of his sensibility to suppose it can continue to support gracefully the growing weight of the artificial encrustations by which he gives form to his work. The images of his best poems show a lovely glaze, but it is the peculiar limitation of this manner, now so much favoured in America, that a Dead Glitter is always waiting her cue in the wings.

The second group of 'technicians' among contemporary American poets take religion as their theme, no doubt seeing in the order of their verse a correspondence to the order of their theology. The best of these poets is Mr. Robert Lowell. He published his second volume, *Lord Weary's Castle*,² in 1946, and official honours were immediately lavished on him. On a more personal level, Mr. Eliot committed himself in glowing terms on the merits of the work, and from Italy came word (via *Time*) that Mr. Santayana kept a copy of *Lord Weary's Castle* by his bedside. To choose from a number of enthusiastic acclamations from America's leading critics which are reprinted on the dust cover of the American edition, I quote Mr. Randall Jarrell: 'It is unusually difficult to say which are the best poems in *Lord Weary's Castle*: at least a dozen are realized past changing, triumphs that vary only in scope and intensity—a number of others are poems that almost any living poet would be pleased to have written. . . . When I reviewed Lowell's first book I finished by saying, "Some of the best poems of the next few years ought to be written by him". The appearance of *Lord Weary's Castle* makes me feel less like Adams or Leverrier than like a rain-maker who predicts rain, and gets a flood which drowns everyone in the country. A few of these poems, I believe, will be read as long as men remember English'.

There are indeed certain things that make Mr. Lowell's poetry impressive, and since my own criticism will be somewhat less favourable than Mr. Jarrell's, I should like to say at once what I believe those virtues are. In several of his poems there is an immediacy of relation between Lowell's sensibility and the old New England of shipping and the sea that comes off with unique distinction. 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket' (page 18), and particularly the first poem in the sequence which begins,

A brackish reach of shoal off Madaket,—
The sea was still breaking violently and night
Had steamed into our North Atlantic Fleet,

is as original and fine a poem as America has produced. There is a kind of enduring newness in the evocations of the poetry that assert

²This has been republished in a larger selection of Mr. Lowell's work, *Poems: 1938-1949*, by Faber, 9/6. The page references to Mr. Lowell's poems refer to this edition.

themselves more solidly with time. Speaking of a burial at sea,

We weight the body, close
Its eyes and heave it seaward whence it came,
Where the heel-headed dogfish barks its nose
On Ahab's void and forehead . . .

But it is difficult to quote from the poem without quoting it entirely.

An important element in Mr. Lowell's poetry is his feeling for Puritan New England. At the time most, if not all, of these poems were written, Lowell was a convert to the Catholic Church, and the Church forms a large part of their subject matter; but Lowell is not, as Mr. John Berryman has called him, 'the naster of the Catholic subject without peer since Hopkins'. The quality of Lowell's sensibility depends almost entirely on its intractable Protestant puritanism, and it is never at its ease in Catholic images. The very structure of his sensibility is centred in considerations that were of overwhelming importance to the early New Englanders, but which are alien to Catholic feeling—ideas of innate depravity, the utter corruption of human nature and creation, regeneration, damnation of the non-elect, and a habit of tortuous introspection to test the validity of grace in the soul. All these doctrines have in Lowell's poetry professedly undergone conversion to Rome, but on the face of it they still look very much their old Protestant selves. The Blessed Virgin is as bleak in his poetry as if she were wearing a steeple-crowned hat instead of a crown. One critic wrote of Lowell's poetry that it exposed 'the full force of the collision between a long heritage of New England Calvinism and the tenets of the Roman Catholic Church'. The critic was right, for a head-on collision between the Catholic tradition and an Apocaylptic Protestant sensibility is exactly what occurs in a verse like the following from 'Where the Rainbow Ends' (page 80):

In Boston serpents whistle at the cold.
The victim climbs the altar stair and sings:
'Hosannah to the lion, lamb, and beast
Who fans the furnace face of IS with wings:
I breathe the ether of my marriage feast.'
At the high altar, gold
And a fair cloth. I kneel and the wings beat
My cheek. What can the dove of Jesus give
You now but wisdom, exile? Stand and live,
The dove has brought an olive branch to eat.

This poem, particularly the second verse, has a certain impressiveness, but it is a failure ultimately because it ends by being almost unintelligible. For example, the first line above may mean that in Boston sin is non-sensuous and chillblained, being the result mainly of the more frigid spiritual vices. But I am not at all sure. Such a meaning is not inevitable. As for the remainder of this verse, I would guess that the poet has just received Communion, but if so

he commemorates the occasion very oddly indeed for a Catholic. None of the struggle of the opposing traditions, of Apocalyptic Protestantism and the Catholic Church, gets effectively through into the poetry. One is only aware of the grotesquely disturbing contrast, by which Mr. Lowell himself seems not to be bothered; and despite his intention, it is the Protestant element whose tone triumphs.

The Puritan saints, so far from resting on assurances of their election, gave themselves over to some of the most agonizing soul probing ever encouraged by any religion. They examined endlessly the nature of the grace they felt in their souls that they might be sure it was authentic and not a temptation from the Devil; they searched the Scriptures for confirmation, and analysed endlessly the movements of their hearts. All this developed a tone, an attitude—and despite the Catholic gesturing, it is an attitude one finds in Lowell's poetry. This attitude or tone sometimes becomes feverishly tortuous, and leads Lowell into attenuations so rarefied, and through logical transitions so slippery and concealed, that it is frequently impossible to follow him all the way. The poem 'Colloquy in Black Rock' (page 15) is an example of one of these dialogues between Lowell and his own heart as a preparation for its fuller possession by Christ. This seems to me not only a bad poem, but an extremely dull one from almost any point of view; nevertheless, it is worth considering as a way of approaching his most serious defect—the conviction that he is being, not only intelligible, but highly ordered and logical in the structure and disposition of his images when, in reality, his experience is claustrophobically private and subjective. Despite the rigorous appearance of an objective framework of logic, 'The Ferris Wheel' (page 26) is such a poem, and 'In the Cage' (page 64) is another.

A number of Lowell's poems can be interpreted in purely Protestant terms—for example, 'The Drunken Fisherman' (page 41) which is one of his best pieces. And it would no doubt be fairer to Lowell if one were to concentrate on these. But Lowell was specifically acclaimed as a Catholic poet, and to this fact he no doubt owed a good deal of his recognition. But whenever the subject is pointedly Catholic there is something disturbing in the tone. Turning to 'A Prayer for my Grandfather to Our Lady', Lowell's uncertainty or awkwardness is unmistakable under the boldness of feeling in a passage like this one addressed to the Blessed Virgin (page 32):

O Mother, I implore
Your scorched blue thunderbreasts of love to pour
Buckets of blessings on my burning head
Until I rise like Lazarus from the dead:
Lavabis nos et super nivem delabor.

This is a network of conflicting connotations that operates at cross-purposes. 'Thunderbreasts', I presume, is meant to suggest the mythical Thunderbird of various Indian tribes, which was supposed to bring rain, and so the word may imply the life-giving qualities of Our Lady's love. But Our Lady and the Thunderbird

(if it is intended, and I don't see what else could be meant here) belong to traditions too remote from each other to coalesce imaginatively at the low pressure to which they are submitted. Blue, of course, is Mary's colour. And perhaps 'blue thunderbreasts' is meant to emphasize the blue heavens from which rain and grace come. But the quality of Lowell's sensibility is such (and I am thinking of the poem in the full context of the volume) that the word seems likely to start a train of disease images. 'Buckets of blessings on my burning head', is breath-takingly infelicitous. Apart from the ugly sound of it, and the almost Gilbert and Sullivan visual image it presents, it suggests that Our Lady is dousing a halo, which can hardly be what is meant. I am not merely trying to be difficult, but I find this passage typical in the awkward qualities I have mentioned. It frequently happens that when Mr. Lowell is dealing with a religious subject something seems to go wrong with his verse—not inevitably so, for 'The Holy Innocents' (page 15) is a very fine poem. But a religious theme is usually a signal for intolerable strain.

This strain is not lessened when Mr. Lowell relates human action to religious significance. His sequence of four poems, 'Between the Porch and the Altar', is a melodramatic narration of a man who deserts his wife and two children for another woman, gets killed in a motor accident, and goes to Hell. At any rate, that is the action as far as I can follow it, but the character of the seducer seems strangely uneven. Something is left out or too much is put in—it's difficult to say which. In the first poem he is a son with a mother fixation. In the second he is a Concord farmer who, in the closing image, is identified with Adam in the act of committing Original Sin. In the fourth poem he turns up, rather sportily, in a night club shortly before his fatal mishap. Here is the opening of the fourth poem (page 55) and it illustrates the recurrence of that strain or awkwardness that I have just noted elsewhere:

I sit at a gold table with my girl
Whose eyelids burn with brandy. What a whirl
Of Easter eggs is coloured by the lights,
As the Norwegian dancer's crystallised tights
Flash with her naked leg's high-booted skate,
Like Northern Lights upon my watching plate.
The twinkling steel above me is a star;
I am a fallen Christmas tree. Our car
Races through seven red lights—then the road
Is unpatrolled and empty, and a load
Of ply-wood with a tail-light makes us slow.
I turn and whisper in her ear. You know
I want to leave my mother and my wife,
You wouldn't have me tied to them for life . . .

Apparently at that moment the accident occurs which, in view of the sentiments he is expressing just then, sends him straight to the Devil. What strikes me first in the passage is a characteristic and

wooden ugliness that is related to the rhythm, and particularly to Mr. Lowell's flattening habit of placing a caesura just before the last foot in the line. It is a common practice with him, and can be better observed in a poem like 'After the Surprising Conversions' page 71):

I preached one Sabbath on a text from Kings;
He showed concernment for his soul. Some things
In his experience were hopeful. He
Would sit and watch the wind knocking a tree . . .

But to return to the earlier quotation—disagreeable as I think the rhythm is, it is matched by an unsatisfactoriness in the images themselves. Anticipating the descent into Hell in the last part of the poem, the second line strains too hard to get as much sordidness as possible out of a few glasses of brandy, and the sense of strain isn't lessened by the far-fetched image of the Easter eggs, which is obviously introduced for the purpose of recalling the Redemption, quite as if by accident. Again, I wonder why the nationality of the fancy skater is insisted on since the only effect that particular exactness serves is to start the American reader thinking of Sonja Henie. Nor can I understand in what relevant sense the speaker's plate may be said to be 'watching', unless, indeed, he is speaking, not of the plate on the gold table, but of his retina which he compares to a photographic plate. In the next line it is extremely difficult to know what the twinkling steel stands for. It may possibly mean that a sword is hanging above the poet's head, and that the consequent feeling of uncertainty which it engenders is a warning which might, if heeded, save him, and which for that reason he compares to the star of Bethlehem. But I do not know. One hopes it means something less far-fetched. The same kind of imprecision attends the next image into which the figure of the twinkling star naturally moves, 'I am a fallen Christmas tree'. This could mean a number of things, but it hardly seems to mean anything with very much certainty. The action which is recorded in the last lines quoted is handled laboriously and jerkily, and the closing bit of 'wickedness' is blurted out in an extremely youthful way.

Mr. Lowell is fond of bringing in the Devil, but he has never done it more unfortunately than in the finale of this poem:

Here the Lord
Is Lucifer in harness: hand on sword,
He watches me for Mother, and will turn
The bier and baby-carriage where I burn.

This passage is supposed to refer back to the mother-fixation described in the opening poem of the sequence, but unfortunately it catches an Audenesque cadence on the way which reduces it to something less than its stark and bristling intention. Or reading it another way, Lowell seems totally unaware that 'Mother' in this context inevitably recalls the Blessed Virgin, but that it presents

the Mediatrix of Graces in a way that would be unforgivable to all Catholic apologists and artists.

Most critics have referred to Mr. Eliot as among Lowell's chief influences, but I think he is much nearer to Edwin Arlington Robinson. Both poets are disconcertingly fond of classic allusions, and they both present us with little tin-types of unusual American characters and episodes. And both have a disastrously 'literary' taste for the more romantic and ancient themes. We find Mr. Lowell writing exotic little set pieces (but on the surface quite 'modern' and difficult to read): 'Napoleon Crosses the Berezina', 'Charles the Fifth and the Peasant', or 'The Fens' (after Cobbett). As for Mr. Lowell's rhythm, a passage like the following from Robinson provides an antecedent for much of Lowell's verse much nearer than anything in Eliot:

Now I call that as curious a dream
As ever Meleager's mother had—
Aeneas, Alcibiades, or Jacob.
I'll not except the scientist who dreamed
That he was Adam and that he was Eve
At the same time; or yet that other man
Who dreamed that he was Aeschylus, reborn
To clutch, combine, compensate, and adjust
The plunging and unfathomable chorus
Wherein we catch, like a bacchanale through thunder,
The chanting of the new Eumenides,
Implacable, renascent, farcical,
Triumphant, and American.

I should find myself hard-pressed if I were asked to put a particular passage from Lowell against that to demonstrate my point, but with the exception of several poems that seem to me highly distinguished, the volume as a whole is alive with echoes of that kind of writing. The interest and value in Mr. Lowell's poetry lies in the intensity of its Puritanism. No doubt it is necessary for the withered Puritan branch to be grafted on to the Roman stem in order for it to show life again, but once the Puritanism has the sap running in its veins, the Catholic element seems a marked intrusion in the poetry, unconvincing and woodenly handled. This makes for a bleak, and frequently ugly poetry. Some of Lowell's lines achieve something like classic ugliness, and the lines

Her Irish maids could never spoon out mush
Or orange juice enough,

I should be inclined to offer as among the most subtly repulsive on record. In the most literal sense, Lowell's world is astonishingly without colour. His images are all grey and black and white, and they gravitate towards such unpleasant items as snow, ice, snakes choking ducklings, dead cats, rats, coke-barrels, iron tubs, fish, mud, Satan, rubble, stones, smoke, coke-fumes, hammers, the diseases of old age, and every possible variation on the most

depressing aspects of Winter. Except in a few poems I cannot see that Lowell transcends the dreary materials he builds them with. On the few occasions he achieves beauty in his poetry the sea is likely to be beating coldly and sombrely in the background.

And yet Lowell's poetry has an unusual integrity. Most of the time it is ugly, it is frequently awkward and strained, it is not at ease with its Catholic subject-matter. And yet it is authentic in its own way. Mr. Lowell's poetry proves, I think, that the sense of function which I predicated of the American poet in the beginning of this paper is not wholly a product of America's material activity. Among its deeper historical roots one may point to the New England puritanism of the seventeenth century, which regarded logic and rhetoric as a means of knowing and communicating Divine Truth. It is under the banners of logic and rhetoric, although these are subsumed in the name of poet, that Mr. Lowell undertakes his work. No poet could well conceive of a greater function than this religious onslaught on Truth, and it is, as I have tried to show, a function wholly validated by the tradition from which Mr. Lowell emerges. The final product, even if open to serious criticisms, immeasurably surpasses in seriousness and integrity the gilded effusions of some of England's contemporary 'religious' poets who have lately invested their metaphors in the Church.

IV.

The poets I have considered here are all comparatively young and striving, and in order to give a centre to these remarks on American poetry one should not hesitate to ask who is the most intrinsically important poet now writing in America. It seems to me that Wallace Stevens fills that role. His poetry is sometimes painfully difficult.

The poem must resist the intelligence
Almost successfully;

but the difficulty inheres in his profound recognition of the inexplicable quality of experience. It is impossible to undertake a consideration of Stevens' poetry here, but it seems necessary to make the bare assertion of his importance for the American scene if these notes are not to be misleading. Stevens is a thoroughly American poet, but I think he is the only one who perfectly transcends the limitations which characterize his native tradition. Even more: I believe he is the first American poet important enough to be able to counteract, after all these years, the spiritually loose-jointed, tragic influence of Walt Whitman.

Mr. H. L. Mencken once said that the American language was only waiting for the imprint of a major poet like Chaucer or Shakespeare. The remark was absurd for the American language seems to be the greatest difficulty confronting the American poet to-day. It is instable, bullying, commercialized, and Stevens is a very good proof that a genuine American poet will have to make

strategic retreats through its proximate manifestations to arrive at last at its essence, its ultimately durable core. In some ways no poet seems less a mirror of his native language than Stevens. He has created his poetry out of images and phrases, the meaning of which the American (I believe the English don't read him) has to learn from reading *all* his poetry in somewhat the manner that he would learn a foreign language. It is only after he has become thoroughly familiar with Stevens' images and phrases that their profound intimacy with the American language begins to assert itself, and that he begins to discover how importantly and how intensely Stevens' central meaning inheres in the heart of all his poetry. Imaginative insight, the intuition of art (by which Stevens means the creative, synthesizing insight of any human being at his moments of most intense awareness) becomes, in one way and another, the subject of all his poetry, and the essence of its form. Stevens' poetry has an appearance of highly coloured artificiality—almost of being synthetic. It is filled with images of art, and the appearances in the world it offers correspond to the appearances of the real world only in the most esoteric ways. But these appearances express that central meaning and take fire from it so that what in the beginning appeared to us as artificiality ends, by virtue of that very quality, in showing forth and emphasizing the life-giving power of the central legend with which Stevens is concerned.

It is useless to speak of poetry in general terms, but I wish to do little more here than indicate the position that Stevens occupies relative to other American poets. As far as the poets themselves are concerned that position is a little ambiguous. They pay Stevens a great deal of external respect,³ but one frequently senses a strain of uncertainty in their attitude towards him, and his practical influence seems to have been small. I fancy that Stevens somehow seems to them not quite to belong to the Party. His detachment is too great and his relation to his poetry too disinterested. Paradoxically, it is Pound who seems closer to them, and whose Americanism is of an orthodox cut, merely turned wrong side out. Pound's dogmatic assertiveness, his sense of importance and function, are all of a kind that is characteristically American. With much less ability and a different orientation he might easily have stayed at home and become another William Carlos Williams. Stevens is somehow less understandable to the American literary scene, and his poetry has had less direct influence than Pound's. And yet it is also an expression of those characteristics of the American poet I have considered here.

V.

I have been concerned with pointing to the existence of an attitude to poetry which, if properly protected and developed, might

³Stevens was awarded the Bollingen Poetry Prize last year, which had been the cause of so much controversy the preceding year when given to Pound for his *Pisan Cantos*.

become a satisfactory foundation for a highly productive period in American literature. It has been necessary to keep in mind some of the dangers that such an attitude runs in American commercial society—but, after all, such dangers are extraneous. Before bringing these notes to a close I should like to probe a little deeper into the nature of the American's sense of function and responsibility where poetry is concerned, and endeavour to see if it carries any specific principle of limitation inherent in itself, and if so, how this affects the nature of the poetry produced. It is possible to approach the problem by considering the American emphasis on the positive affirmation, on the exercise of will, and on the belief that the future can be engineered profitably if one only has the engineers and the materials—in short, by examining the wholly activist modes of American feeling and thinking. I think it is doubtful if the greatest poetry is ever written in these modes, which are never wholly disinterested. If poetry is a fiat, it is never mere assertion, however brave; and if it is a source of truth, it is yet never praiseworthy for its dogma. Probably the greatest poetry in our time is the *Four Quartets*. It no doubt owes some of its popularity to the fact that critics can drag dogma out of it, but that is by the way. If Mr. Eliot was once an American poet (and he may still not be an *English* poet), he never expressed the distance of his sensibility from American modes more fully than in these poems. A measure of that distance may be found in such lines as

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

That great poetry and intense experience should come out of something undergone or suffered in this way is not the first lesson one learns from American poetry. It fails to understand that element of passivity which is part of the base of great art, and it frequently mistakes the turmoil for the reality. Americans are supposed to like—or to have liked in the past—classical art. But it is the rhetorical gesture and not the moment of repose that they are inclined to value most. Mr. Eliot's lines express their remoteness from the American sensibility in a number of ways. The American would not snub Hope (which in his heart at least he would surely capitalize) in the way that Mr. Eliot does. He knows that Hope literally cleared the wilderness, and confronted with the solid monuments she has erected across the continent, the most critical of poets would hesitate to question too radically whether or not it was, after all, hope of the wrong thing. I do not mean that the American poet might not be as critical as the English poet on the surface, but he is too much a part of the fabric to question very profoundly unless he should also be willing to remove himself from the scene for good. Nor would the American sensibility, which is nervous and impatient, understand the goodness of waiting. To be up and doing, even in matters

of spirituality—to say nothing of poetry—is all its sweetness and joy. Nor could it suppose it was not ready for thought, for too many fragments of eighteenth century rationalism (highly modernized, of course) still inhere in its optimism. And it would have some difficulty in distinguishing thought from the processes of technology, with which it has enjoyed great success. Above all, it could not accept the resignation of the last line. It is much too devoted to activity to allow stillness to come masquerading in that fashion. In a word, dancing is dancing, and being still is something no American is instinctively impressed by.

The sense of function in the American poet is influenced deeply, and essentially modified by this activism. This activism is likely to discourage the greatest poetic achievement, but this, at least, can be said for it: it conceives poetry in a public capacity, and the poetry it produces frequently has something of the forum in it. It is not likely to enlarge experience by the original insights of genius operating at the highest level of the imagination, but it is able to explore and define experience deliberately or forensically within certain set boundaries and propositions. Such poetry will tend to have a validity in the American scene that it will not always be able to carry over into other contexts. If we can say that this is a serious criticism of the poetry, we should not lose sight of the more difficult point that the very limitation carries its intimate importance for the American tradition itself, which is still in a formative stage.

Having once said that American poetry is in an 'emergent' period, it was necessary to proceed at once to qualifications, but I have certainly not wished to qualify the original statement away until nothing substantial was left. I am the more concerned because I know the English reader will have far less difficulty in agreeing with the unfavourable aspects of this analysis of American poetry than he will have in recognizing the utter inanition which prevails in his own literary scene at present. Bad as it is in many respects, the American scene is better off than the English in these points: American poets have places to publish, and are encouraged to do so; being published they are read, and if their audience is not large neither is it microscopic; they are discussed and evaluated, and if the judgments are sometimes much too high, one can at least say that the critical faculty is invoked; poets have a faith in their function, and if the faith sometimes needs discipline and correction, it nevertheless provides a solid working base on which to begin; American poets have, or come nearer to having, a subject than English poets by virtue of their relationship with a society that is in the process of undertaking new responsibilities that enlarge its historical consciousness and its sense of obligation. It is greatly to America's credit that, whether knowingly or not, she has promoted this sense of relationship. Finally, American poets are supported by a vigorous and warm enthusiasm. If this 'enthusiasm' is an ingenuous national characteristic about which the British have occasionally been condescending in the past, the melancholy literary scene which now surrounds them, and from which anything like

the English equivalent of American enthusiasm has wearily departed should enforce the lesson that though affirmations may be too loud, and convictions worn as jauntily as cockades, they may be better than none at all. A faith that comes too easily will not produce great poetry, but it may just possibly assist in a survival out of which great poetry may some day come. And the bare problem of survival is perhaps not the least which, in such matters, confronts the English-speaking world.

MARIUS BEWLEY.

WHAT IS 'BACKGROUND'?

THE ENCHANTED GLASS by Hardin Craig (Blackwell, 12/6).

With the general thesis of this book—that Renaissance literature cannot be properly understood without a knowledge of the Renaissance mind—there will be ready agreement; for the abundance of information there will be ready gratitude. The range of authorities and sources is impressive, extending from Jerome and Origen to Bacon and Milton, and from minor tracts like the *Life of Paul the Hermit* to the *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. Most of the central issues are well worth recalling. For example, Prof. Craig sees clearly that what he calls the background of literature 'cannot be just details, or even bodies of separate details attached as notes to particular passages' (p. 238). And, amid so much emphasis on economic and literary movements, it is somewhat re-assuring to find so explicit a recognition that if 'we seek to know the sources of Elizabethan thought, we must turn to the subject of religion' (p. 49). While carrying his own learning modestly, he rightly insists that, whatever our estimate of their value, the doctrines of the Renaissance must be recognized as having important bearings on the literature. In this insistence, he conscientiously avoids (and helps the reader to avoid) despising the Elizabethans for their fumbling attempts at science or their ready acceptance of theories now discarded or disproved; we are assisted towards seeing that what appears superstitious to-day was originally accepted on grounds of apparent reasonableness. On these bases a re-construction of the mental world of the Renaissance is fully justified.

At the same time, the learning presented needs rather more organization than it has received. Neither by general statement nor by individual example are we brought towards any principle of what information is, and what information is not, relevant in a study like this. He does not indicate what kind of clarification we can expect from further knowledge of the period, nor what methods of evaluation it will help us to use. There is hardly any attempt to sort out the elements which helped and the elements which hindered the Elizabethan writer—except for the rather puzzling view (p. 219) that Elizabethan art conventions were simply an obstacle to free inventiveness. The writer himself does not offer any critical esti-