POETRY

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COVER BY HENRY MOORE

MSS. (with stamped addressed envelopes) should be sent to the Editor, business and general communications to the Secretary, 26, Manchester Square, W.1. Welbeck 8178.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

STEPHEN COATES: author of *Second Poems* (PL): one of the most original younger poets, his work first became known when he was at Cambridge. He has since been a schoolmaster.

LAWRENCE DURRELL: became known for his novel, *The Black Book*, which was published in Paris before the war, and of which T. S. Eliot wrote in praise. Has published two books of poems with Faber, and *Prospero's Cell*, a book about Corfu. *Cefalu*, his new novel, is published by PL.

GEORGE BARKER: an exciting and revolutionary poet, his first books were heartily damned in *New Verse*, but he later became accepted by it, and with Dylan Thomas became the most prominent poet of the post-Auden generation. His latest book is *Eros in Dogma* (Faber).

RAYNER HEPPENSTALL: another poet damned by *New Verse*, who later made his name as a novelist with *Blaze of Noon* (Secker and Warburg). His *Selected Poems* have recently been issued by the same publisher.

GAVIN EWART: gained a great reputation at Cambridge (and even before that) as a writer of witty and amusing poems with a serious satiric flavour. These have been published by the Fortune Press. His recent poems are more serious, but show the same adroitness and wit.

HUGH GORDON PORTEOUS: first became known as a critic (which he still is); later for his excellent poems (two of which were in PL 11).

PATRICK ANDERSON: a Canadian poet who has the reputation of being the most interesting poet now writing in his country; he has been published in many magazines, particularly in America, including POETRY (CHICAGO). This is his first appearance in PL.

DAVID WRIGHT: a volume of his poems will be published shortly by PL; widely published in magazines and anthologies.

FRANCIS SCARFE: author of *Auden and After*. A book of his poems to be published by PL, is in preparation. During the war he became known as one of the most promising of the younger poets, and through his critical work one of their ablest theoreticians.

G. S. FRASER: has recently travelled in South America, and is writing a book about it. Author of *Home Town Elegy* (PL), his new book of poems is to be published jointly by PL and The Harvill Press, who recently published his translation of Patrice de la Tour du Pin's *The Dedicated Life of Poetry*.

BERNARD SPENCER: a well known poet from the 'thirties whose output is small but of rare quality. During the war edited *Personal Landscapes* in Cairo with Lawrence Durrell, Terence Tiller and Robin Fedden. His first books of poems *Ægean Islands and other Poems* was recently published by *Poetry London*, and he is lecturing in English at the moment at Palermo University.

RUTHVEN TODD: At present he is in America where he has been experimenting in reviving Blake's printing methods with the co-operation of artists such as Joan Miro, Max Ernst and Yves Tanguy. His most recent book of poems was published by the Grey Walls Press, as were his novels, *The Lost Traveller* and *Over the Mountain*.

KEITH DOUGLAS: his book of war experiences was hailed in press notices as one of the classics of the war just over, and the poems included in that volume attracted universally favourable comment. *Bête Noire*, his first collection of poems will be ready for Christmas, which will be followed by his *Collected Poems*. He was killed in action in Normandy.

POETRY
LONDON

EDITOR: TAMBIMUTTU

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In Homage of Gandhi

GANDHI'S FAVOURITE *BHAJAN*

(DEVOTIONAL SONG)

Raga : Khamaj-Thumali

The Good man is conscious of others' suffering
And healing suffering, pride in his mind does not bring.
The good man is conscious of others' suffering.

In the great universe, to all, homage, censuring none,
Constant in mind, speech, appearance; hail, hail his begetter,
The good man is conscious of others' suffering.

Even in vision, undesiring, with filial respect for women,
With his tongue, falsehood never utters, and the wealth of others not desiring,
The good man is conscious of others' suffering.

Attachment, Maya[1], do not cover him; firm Vairagya[2] in his mind,
In tune with the name of Ram, his body the monument of holy places,
The good man is conscious of others' suffering.

Unavaricious, and without deceit, anger and passion discarding;
Says Narsingha (the Poet): On beholding him, seventy-one generations reach absolution,
The good man is conscious of others' suffering.

Translated from the Gujarati by H. G. Pandya and T. Tambimuttu

[1] Illusion, Worldly Pleasure. [2] Freedom from earthly ties.

NOTE:—The original was composed in Gandhi's mother tongue by Narsingh Mehta (15th century A.D.). The poem, having universality of appeal, has still preserved its freshness. It was Gandhi's favourite song and was invariably recited at his prayer meetings. Mr. Pandya himself had the opportunity of reciting it, once, on the occasion of Gandhi's fasting at Rajkot, Kathiawar.

LOUIS MACNEICE

TWELFTH NIGHT

Snow-happy hicks of a boy's world—
O crunch of bull's eyes in the mouth,
O crunch of frost beneath the foot—
If time would only remain furled
In white, and thaw were not for certain
And snow would but stay put, stay put!

When the pillar box wore a white bonnet—
O harmony of roof and hedge,
O parity of sight and thought—
And each flake had your number on it
And lives were round for not a number
But equalled nought, but equalled nought!

But now the sphinx must change her shape—
O track that reappears through slush,
O broken riddle, burst grenade—
And lives must be pulled out like tape
To measure something not themselves,
Things not given but made, but made.

For now the time of gifts is gone—
O boys that grow, O snows that melt,
O bathos that the years must fill—
Here is dull earth to build upon
Undecorated; we have reached
Twelfth Night or what you will . . . you will.

PLACE OF A SKULL

Earth water stars and flesh—the seamless coat
Which is the world, he left; who from today
Had no more need to wear it. The remote
Metropolis yawned, the parchment flapped away,

Away, and the blood dried in the sand. The bored
Soldiers played for the leavings but even they,
Though trained to carve up continents with the sword,
Approved the weaver who had made night and day

And time and mind a tegument, therefore swore
To hazard it as one lot. The dice were gay
And someone won: *Why the first time I wore*
That dead man's coat it frayed I cannot say.

STEPHEN COATES

POEM I

Against the background of a cyclorama sky
The poplars sag and lean and dither, the chimneys
Squat flame-like over the shadowed street
And the horizontal sun makes a ground evening
With a late afternoon for starlings and aeroplanes.

And the lily and marigold close down for the night,
The baby does not cry. In dusty corners
The boys and girls admire eyes, dresses and bicycles ;
By which time the ink has dried on Post Office pens
And children are bedtime and lovable again in dressing gowns.

Against an unforseen disaster the unwary muscles
Repeat the motions of living, thoughtless,
Unprincipled, undivided, not apprehensive;
The ticket machines do not go unused; the café
Awaits its patrons with imperturbable confidence.

And not to be disappointed the arc closes,
The circling cone swings across our faces.
Worms and foxes bustle into awareness, moths yawn,
Doors shut, light rises, smoke falls, night closes,
The enfolded lily slips completed into the cooling water.

POEM II

It is the itch under the finger nails, the secondary observation;
—The avenue of flying trees that is many avenues—
That compels, after two summers, the latest attack,
The attempt to scratch recognition out of the white
Idiot face of this terrifying paper. Here
We are back in the oldest ocean, the deadest desert,
The problem in mathematics which has no formula;
Back among the doddering images and motionless birds;
And renew the acquaintance, with a carefully prepared glance,
Of the wobble in the abdomen and pain inside the lungs.

Nevertheless I have learned that it is not I.

The " I " that drives this pencil, selects these words,
Is avid to avoid the capital words, the signs,
Roughened on the edges with too much printing;
The " Other side of Time," the " Self of the Heart,"
The bag and paraphenalia of the bankrupt poet.
The lazy tricks also of the idly mixed metaphor,
The allusion at third hand, the cross-word quotation.

Nevertheless I have learned that it is not I.

Without reference to belief it is yet possible
To be aware of the other avenues in the trees, of the bottoms
Below the deepest dandelion root; to be surprised
At the severity and dignity of the baby; to acknowledge
The possibility of meaning behind the huge, absurd dream.
This is not the gay, or gloomy, or apprehensive,
Arterial out of the avenue: this is not now
Any question of those trees growing taller than these:
—Surely this water-lily is a sufficient and good water-lily.
We do not stand on a doorstep but in a field:
The grey hay falls to our mower, and look—
I shall try to show you the look of cut ground after the knife—
And it is a knife that few are able to manipulate,
Which requires skill, patience, practice and abandon beyond,
Perhaps, the possibility of my ever acquiring—after that knife
Has passed—not for the first or last time.

I have learned that it is not I.

Provisionally: let us sing to the spherical universe
A sample of our noble, semi-ignorant song.

POEM III

I could see the forest stalking across the prairie
Or the unnatural tiger eating its latest young;
The bulbous spider preparing to get up early
To devour the first daffodil of another spring.

The tortoise across the drawing-room carpet
Treads its tertiary way towards the groundsel
Dropped from the prison window by the gaping linnet
Preoccupied with the thrush and lark in council:

There the potential waves flourish across lines
Of geometrical and green wheat, the long hunger
Begins. Rats prepare to forsake the warmest drains,
And golden chariots in the sky forewarn of danger.

The coordination of hand and eye is improved.
Again the cocoon breaks, the enslaved bank
Breaks; the grey air rarefied, the flat sea moved,
And again the black leaves by the opal-apple drunk.

PATRICK ANDERSON

WATCHING YOUNG NUNS

What practical black for God's perpetual downpour,
I think when, rain
scrambling the lawn,
I see a vision of young and hurrying nuns
moving their folds of shadow:
lightly in gliding twos they flow, and follow
domesticated sorrow through ruins of rain.

Though silk umbrellas tremble above their crowns,
miraculous muscle
swelling those veils
sails their faces far beyond dimples and smiles
till they, cocooned in the ineffable,
their pale hands holding keys and streams of stones,
are beautiful and crude and cruel as swans.

Their robes are formal feeling, flash and furl—
the tragic weather
or dark they wear
enables them to handle and push through care—
is the soul, then, a camera
empty and sad beyond snap's secular glare ?—
they smile, the lens stays technical and cool.

Yet they are young, they are girls—the tough prayer
twisting their mouths,
I think their breath
floats scent of peppermint towards Christ's door:
too young, too young to freeze in youth forever,
to freeze in longing, as when grate's black bars
admonish us with death
and show all sensual summer ferns, not fires.

DAVID WRIGHT

SONNET

After Angelo di Costanzo

O you fortunate swans, who sentinel
The windings of the lucky Mincius, say
Whether among your nests was born (reply
If this be true) our poet, great Virgil ?

May peace surround your bones, fair Siren ! Tell
Where it pleased him those hours to pass away
Filled with calm joy; or, when he came to die,
Whether it was on your soft lap he fell ?

What better gift or favour might he have
From Fortune, so to end as he'd begun ?
What was more like his cradle than his grave ?

The silver-throated swans, when he was born,
Made gentle music; destined at his death
To be by the cloaked Sirens darkly sung.

FRANCIS SCARFE

THE MAGIC LAMP

Alas, Aladdin, your lamp of gold
Is tarnished now, is dark and old.

Though you rub it with might and main
Your anger only spreads the stain,

It will stay as black as coal
Though you breathe on it with your soul,

And though you trim the silken wick
The flame stays dull, and the smoke thick.

Though you bruise your tender hand
No gleam appears on the dark band,

And though you whisper, coax and cry
The Lamp will utter no reply;

Though you wish but the smallest thing
—A kiss, a smile, a book, a ring—

No Genie rises to your call
And unconsoled your tears fall.

Aladdin, I will tell you why
The Genie has become so shy,

Why the Lamp which shone so bright
Gives but the shadow of a light,

Why your strongest wishes fall
Like sparks against a chimney wall.

It is because, I am quite sure,
Few wishes are denied the pure;

For once you really did believe
A rub of gold would cure all grief;

Or that an infant's voice could still
The vast desires of the will.

But when you wished to be a man
You wished as much as a boy can,

And now, no man rubbing this toy
Can change you back into a boy.

G. S. FRASER

THE ABSENCE OF THE DEAD

Long and composed, upon
A narrow lap, her hands
Rise at a bait and fly
Impinging on no air:
Watch them to understand
Her harsh, beguiling eye,
As still and swift as these,
Watch what is dead and gone,
Delusive images . . .
Long at this nothing stare.

All these phenomena were
Imprinted on a body that
Thick strife has swallowed:
Without it, are not her.
Projected, but not flat,
These make a deep impress,
These carve a sad no-sense,
A void round and hollowed.
Bake, Void, with Fire she had
Whom Earth has taught patience:
Water, be still and sad:
Air, be this emptiness.
All elements are mad.

We, in the dead of night,
Caught in our own surprise
Have heard our own breath
Move in a beast's gasp,
Grasping at us, would grasp
Hots, Colds, Wets, Dries,
Knowing unravelling Death:
Who calls this knowledge slight?

Though its matter is spent,
Thought sustains elegance:
Seen in a fretful year,
On a conversational day,
Elaborate discontent
With her frangible matter
Making that form clear
That it would waste away.
In the corner where she sat
Nursing her long beer
With her insolent hat,
Dust and the sun now dance.
Grief is as vain as rage.
Certain acquaintances please
And certain doors close.
Quietly, with no clatter.
Time, that can discompose
Material certainties,
Has discomposed this image.

WALDEMAR HANSEN

AUGURIES OF THE ARCANE

In Babylon the apples hung
Uneaten. And the wise men sang

Of arcs in the sky, of a shepherd's rod,
Four suns, four moons, roses of blood,
Four seasons and a pyramid.

Their wisdom numbered twenty-one.
Zero was added. Time was done.

In Babylon those wise men gave
Knowledge to gamblers and all thieves.

Fire ran through the hanging gardens,
Licking green boughs where images hardened.

A wandering butterfly, the clown
Named every flower for his home.

The popess was an intimate:
Ariel with a golden net.

One pope ate apples. Serpents tried
To make the world a paradise.

Lovers opened doors with kisses,
Transmuting keys to braying asses.

The whore of justice was so blind
Her scales were balanced at the end.

Hermits lit their lamps by day
To keep the soul's dark night away.

A woman opened a lion's mouth
And turned the north wind to the south.

Childe Harolde in Babel's tower fished
And saw his soul when lightning flashed.

Ulysses, by powerful stars, was led
To a mirror where his face had fled.

Red angels called on the poet's words
To foil the genius of the birds.

In Babylon the apples hung
Uneaten. And the wise men cried
Of a man with a red cup in his side,
While bells in towers cracked and rang.

Four journeys carried the hanged man wide:
Thieves and gypsies spilled the seed.

And wisdom numbered twenty-one.
Zero was added. Time was done.

Green fire ran through the libraries.
Red fire ran through the bluest seas.
Nothing was left but these.

A. J. McGEOGH

ANNUS MIRABILIS

These mornings calm and grey, sprinkled with bronze,
When trees grow scant, and constant dahlias still
Garnish the weathered stone, one tiny throat
Rouses the silence, resolute and shrill:

Before the screech-owl's infant cry has stopped
At the wood's end, a robin takes the air
To spin the season out, console our hearts
Against the prospect of the huddled, bare

Damp, dark, unlit, uncomfortable world
We soon must walk in; staunch survivor he
Of the late summer's music; innocent
Of mind that sees as some huge parody

The seasons' calendar aped by events
That hunt the soul—man hounding nightmare man
With cruelties more shrewd than frost's nadir,
More searching than the prairie's torrid sun:

Earth trembles here—but there the mines are sprung,
A buried landscape hides its charnel face;
The meteor's harmless splendour flakes a night
Scrawled with the pyrotechnics of disgrace.

Delight in leaf and petal, fur and plume,
The brittle bright, the exquisitely frail,
Lingers on sufferance, disquiet at core . . .
The sundial's shadow has a twisted tail.

The swifts we watch in reckless knife-wing sport
Weave, dart, and glide, slip out of nature's reach,
In the mind's sky become the prototype
Of fierce machines that raked Salerno beach:

A spectre overlooks the diary's page:
Orchards wind-scattered here—in Sicily
Lemons—and men—swept down by senseless steel;
The pall of battle ousting Etna's sky;

Our rivers brown in flood—Messina Straits
Turned in their agony from puce to red;
Pompei's shell in man's new holocaust
Sprouting even grislier shapes of maimed and dead;

An oak is splayed by lightning—Naples sacked;
Autumnal armies flee destruction's drum,
Corpses are piled like leaves; but here this last
Sole-singing robin cheers the road to Rome.

LAWRENCE DURRELL

FUNCHAL

At Funchal the blackish yeast
Of the winter sea that rubbed and gobbled
Upon a thousand capes and estuaries
Coiled back once more and pressed its tides
Level and uniform like grapes in presses,
Expressing a horizontal mood,
The weather slowing like a pedal,
Smelling now of sick and spices:
Red leather and the spermy polish
Sailors rubbing upon the cloudy brasswork,
Could tell night was night once more,

Beyond the introspective glare
Of the green islands upon the awnings,
Saint Vincent mirrored in the pupils,
Marrow of romance and old sea-fevers,
To whomever leaned against the sanded rail,
On this half-deck polished like a nape.

TENERIFFE

Situated but purposely at the very end
Of these long couloirs of water,
A disposition chosen by herself,
Determined by ideas which drew upon
Experience of the passions—who knows ?—
Perhaps a desire for union with the infinite,
Weariness of society or impatience,

Remains unquestionably a woman, Teneriffe,
Used to such metaphors, a stone of some rare water,
In this green gallery of atmospheres
Knowing as she does in her maturity,
Her experience of manners how men
Abhor certainty in love: if she must hold us
She must tragically withold the true herself.

SIERRA

The grass they cropped converting into speed
Made green the concert of their hooves
Over the long serene sierras turning
In the axle of the sun's eye
To legs as delicate as spiders', picking out
Pathways for shadows mounted on them:
Enigma, Fosforos, and Indigo, which rumbled
Through the pursuing quarries like a wind
To where the paths fall, and we all of us
Go down with the sun, sierra by sierra, held
A moment rising in the stirrups, then abandoned
To where the black valleys from their shoes
Subtract sparks upon flints, and the long
Quivering swish of tails on flesh
Try to say " sleep," try to say " food " and " home."

W. S. GRAHAM

From THE WHITE THRESHOLD

Let me all ways from the deep heart
Drowned under behind my brow so ever
Stormed with other wandering, speak
Up famous fathoms well over strongly
The pacing whitehaired kingdoms of the sea.

I walk towards you and you may not walk away.

Always the welcome-roaring threshold
So ever bell worth my exile to
Speaks up to greet me into the hailing
Seabraes seabent with swimming crowds
All cast all mighty water dead away.

I rise up loving and you may not move away.

Let me all ways from these seas
Restore to never forswear my air
Breathed in the lamblood-reddened deep.
For heart and whale's in covenant,
The caaing thresher in his splendid blood.

Very end then of land. What vast is here ?

Always the saving seadoors well
Worth salt homecomer speaking up
The heaving hundredweights of water,
Save me down into a homecome tiding
Worth while and breath here with my smothering farers.

Your while in all your mighty times is here.

Let me all ways from the deep heart
That's put down out of the crowded air
And put to self seawork across
The rudimental waste and maiden-
Headed foamthatch, speak up the watery ladders.

Your fathoms hear the sheerhulk winches wind.

Always these all sea families felled
In diving burial hammocks or toppled
Felled elm back into the waving woods,
Wear me my words. The nettling brine
Stings through the word. The Morven maiden cries.

Your heartlit fathoms hurl their ascending drowned.

Very end then of land. What vast is here ?
The drowning saving while, the threshold sea
Always is here. You may not move away.

GAVIN EWART

SONNET

Armies, like homes once hated, feed and clothe
And occupy with certain dull routine,
Are Fathers, strict, and cannot ever soothe,
Nor see what lovers with clear eyes have seen.
Good at its job, the soldierly, keen eye
Combs fields for gun sites and the sky for planes ;
Landscapes suggest campaigns—but you and I
Are too fine detail on those endless plains
Where generals are romping. " Personnel "
Would be our label ; we are on their files.
And where you are no flag will ever tell
Although my love for you should cover miles.
Known to the wise, for you I write it out—
There are two worlds, within us and without.

1942.

SONNET

We make mistakes, my darling, all the time,
Love where we are not wanted, sigh alone,
Simply because our passions are not tame.
No fairy story dragons to be slain,
Our difficulties are not so simple.
Huge effort cannot bring a love to birth,
The future offers no instructive sample
Of what's to come upon a warlike earth.

O, if I had time back and you to kiss
I would not now reject your wasted sweetness,
But meet the tide and fullness of your love
(If some invisible god would stoop to bless
And cancel my love's blindness and its lateness),
That now ebbs from me daily, wave by wave.

1942.

TU FU

POEM

What can one say in a phrase ?
How can one catch it all in a single stanza ?
I think I shall sell up my bric-a-brac. Also my books.
I want to get down to finding the springs of things.

Coming on scenes like this, one ought to amble,
Letting the spell steal over the senses slowly.
How good, for a start, to feel the texture of birds,
Parting the feathers to finger the underdown:

Or to take an exact essay of a sample stamen,
Computing the weight of gold in a grain of pollen.

What stuff. But at ease on a carpet of grass
I find in my bones a compassion for aged trees
Which ring in their topmost leaves the changes of pendant jades,
Sonorous, green as the waves of restive seas.

(*Translated by Hugh Gordon Porteus*)

LI T'AI PO

TAVERN SONG

The Rest House by Chin Ling is well named Rough House.
Twitchgrass chokes the path where it all began.
Old rancours never disperse, like water, eastwards.
Grief is about this place, is even borne
A burden of local winds, and sorrows burn
On whitened wands of aspen, incandescent.
In the footsteps of K'ang Lo, I board the ferry,
Softly humming " The Clear Brook gathers the Nightfrost."
They say there were songs from the island, some time back,
Able to blend in harmony all five tones:
Well what: Am I less than Hsieh, or the heir of Yuan ?
O frigid the notes of the loud bamboos
Which to and fro saw through the autumn moon.
I suffer the night alone, tense behind blinds,
Dreaming of home afar, and of swift return.

(*Translated by Hugh Gordon Porteus*)

LO YANG (after Wu Ti)

How gay is the town of Lo Yang:
With its roads brilliant with April:

The gallants go by with their lutes
And the mulberry girls with their hampers.

Glitter of gilt on saddles, gleaming flanks,
Glimpses of verdure caught through sleeves of gauze . . .

Beating the dawn, the carts come clattering home,
And the girls with their high piled hampers.

(*Translated by Hugh Gordon Porteus*)

GRIEF

Lovely the girl unfurling the pearlfringed curtain
Who sits in her boudoir weeping.
Her eyebrows fine, with pathos of feelers of moths,
Are knitted together now with unspeakable sorrow.
One witnesses also the shimmering smears of tears.
She suffers like this, perhaps, on account of whom ?
Alas, we shall never discover.

(*Translated by Hugh Gordon Porteus*)

TING LIU NIANG

REQUEST

From shot silk cut, my kirtle of peacock pattern,
Scarlet and turquoise—harmonious, also contrasting,—
Dazzles the eye like scaly gold of dragonskin.
So exotic a thing should clearly excite admiration.

My Lord, I believe, is already aware of my waistline.
It is thus to my love that I mention the lack of a girdle.

(*Translated by Hugh Gordon Porteus*)

KEITH DOUGLAS

ADAMS

Walking beside the beach
where the Mediterranean turns in sleep
under the cliffs' demiarch,

walking thinking slowly I see
a dead bird and a live bird,
the dead eyeless: but with a bright eye

the live bird discovered me
stepping from a black rock into the air.
Leave the dead bird lie; watch him fly,

electric, brilliant blue—
beneath, he is orange, like flame—
colours I can't believe are so :

as legendary flowers bloom
incendiary in tint, a focal point
like Adams in a room.

Adams is like a bird;
alert (high on his pinnacle of air
he does not hear you, someone said);

in appearance he is bird-eyed
the bones of his face are
like the hollow bones of a bird.

And he stood by the elegant wall
between two pictures hanging there
certain of homage from us all;

as through the mind this minute
he draws the universe
and like our admiration, dresses in it,

towering like the cliffs of this coast
with his stiletto wing
and orange on his breast;

sucked up, utterly drained
the colours of my sea,
the yellow of this tidal ground;

swallowing all my thought,
swallows all those dark fish there
whom a rock hides from sunlight. . . .

Till Rest, cries my mind to Adams' ghost,
only go elsewhere, let me alone
creep into the dead bird, cease to exist.

Nathanya, 1941

I EXPERIMENT

The shadows of leaves falling like minutes
seascapes discoveries of sea creatures
and voices out of the extreme distance reach us
like conjured sounds Faces cruising like spirits

across the backward glance of the brain
In the bowl of the mind a pot pourri
Such shapes and colours become a lurid
decor to the adventures that are a cycle When

I play dancers choreographers critics role
I see myself dance happiness and pain
(each as illusory as rain)
in silence Silence Break it with the small

isolated tinkle the apathetic buzz buzz
pirouetting into a crescendo BANG until
as each scene closes hush the stage is still
Everything is where it was

The finale if it should come is
the moment my love and I meet
our hands move out across a room of strangers
certain they hold the rose of love.

MR. EMPSON'S APPROACH AND METHOD

by G. S. Fraser

Seven Types of Ambiguity : A Study of Its Effects in English Verse, Revised Edition, by William Empson

(Chatto and Windus, London, 10s. 6d.)

I

Some people find Mr. Empson's abrupt changes of gear a little jarring. He seems to switch from feeling to thinking with what, for the ordinary man, is a disconcerting rapidity, and what he is thinking about, with extraordinary detachment, is precisely what he has just been feeling: he can fix his feelings (" a metaphor," as he says, " from printing snapshots ") so as to be able, without in the least disowning them, to examine them as if they were a stranger's. He can be, as it were, either doctor to his own patient, or specimen to his own demonstrator. He is not alarmed by what, looking into his own most intimate reactions, he is going either to discover or to display. People, perhaps, are right to be taken a little aback by this unusual gift of sudden self-detachment. " I do not," Mr. Empson himself says, " say that this power is of unique value; it tends to prevent the sensibility from having its proper irrigating and fertilising effect upon the person as a whole; a mediæval sensibility may have been more total and satisfying than a modern one." So may a more recent type of sensibility, the " unified sensibility " which Mr Eliot finds in the metaphysical poets of the English seventeenth century, who were capable of " a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling "; but a dissociation of sensibility and thought set in, in English poetry, with Milton and Dryden, the rupture has since prolonged itself, and perhaps the best that a modern poet and critic can do is to attempt, like Mr. Empson, to build a bridge. Our age is not one that makes for unified sensibility, and if we do not make a distinction between our thinking and our feeling, today, our thinking is likely to be muddled, and our feeling insincere: on the other hand, unless we attempt, like Mr. Empson, to build some sort of a bridge between them, we shall probably go mad. Indeed, the muddled, the insincere, the mad, and the bridge-builders comprise between them, probably, the four main types of modern intellectual. The historical conditions for a unified sensibility do not yet exist, and seem not likely to exist in the foreseeable future. Probably, indeed, we shall have to go on accepting a great deal of muddle and insincerity in order to compose a sufficiently unified facade for the business of ordinary living.

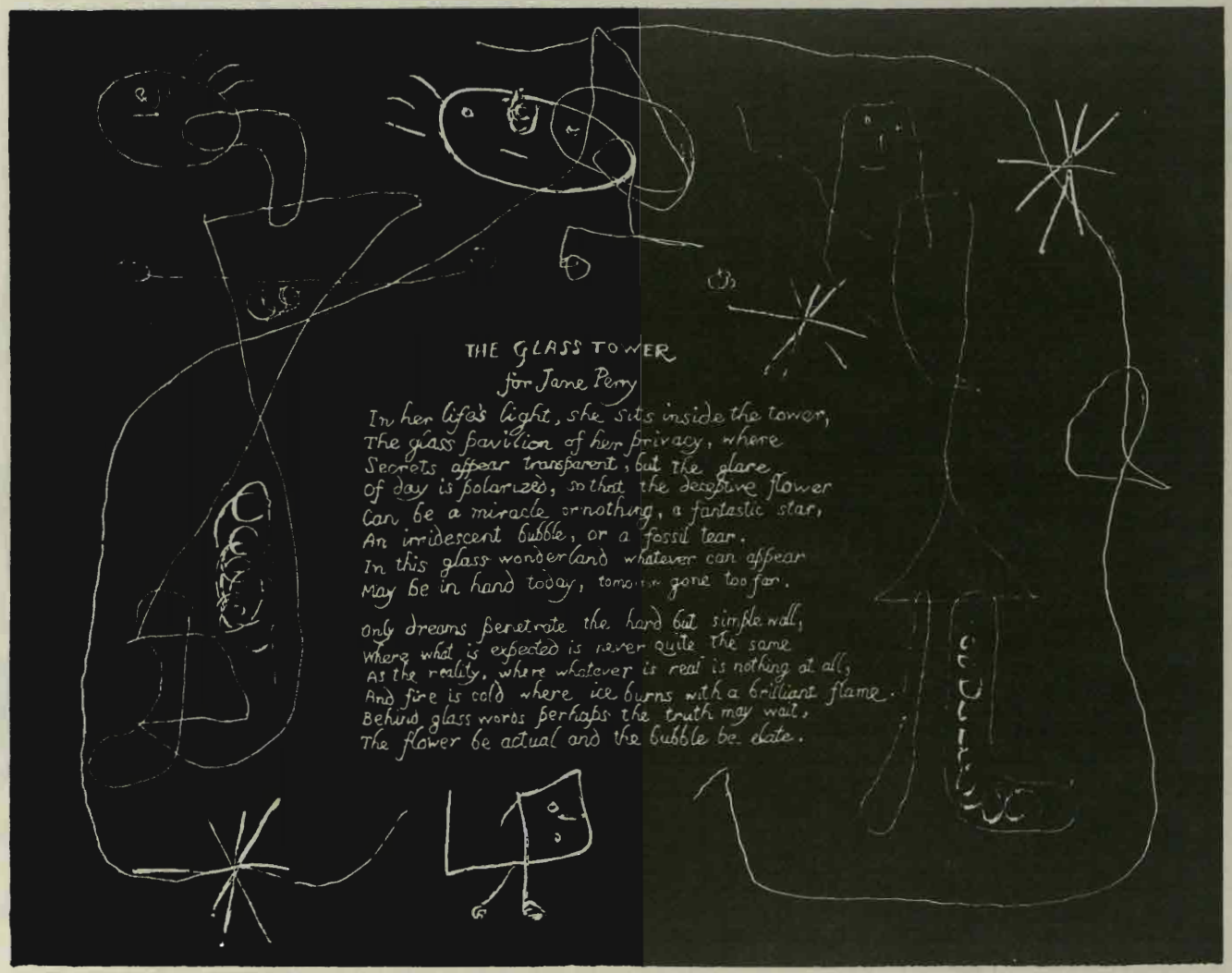
The passage from which the above remark of Mr. Empson's is taken is his most illuminating general account of his approach to poetry, and perhaps to life, and so deserves to be quoted at length: " So that," he says, " to defend analysis in general one has to appeal to the self-esteem of the readers of the analysis, and assume that they possess a quality that is at present much respected. They must possess a fair amount of equilibrium or fairly strong defences; they must have the power first of reacting to a poem sensitively and definitely (one may call that 'feminine') and then, having fixed the reaction, properly stained, on a slide, they must be able to turn the microscope on to it with a certain indifference and without smudging it with their fingers ; they must be able to prevent their new feelings of the same sort from interfering with the process of understanding the original ones (one may call that 'masculine') and have enough detachment not to mind what their sources of satisfaction may

turn out to be. . . . This quality is admired at present because it gives one a certain power of dealing with anything that may turn out to be true; and people have come to feel that that may be absolutely anything." Mr. Empson then makes the remark already quoted about how this periodical self-detachment may prevent the critic from developing a " total and satisfying " sensibility. " But," he then asserts, " it is widely and reasonably felt that these people are better able to deal with our present difficulties whose defences are strong enough for them to be able to afford to understand things; nor can I conceal my sympathy with those who want to understand as many things as possible, and to hang those consequences which cannot be foreseen." A notion rather like this has been expressed by a poet who, since his life has been unusually solitary, has been able to develop a unified (and perhaps in a sense a mediæval) sensibility, though he has only been able to convey his feelings so far in an extremely subjective way: Patrice de la Tour du Pin. Tour du Pin's statement is at once more concise and less practically useful. " The lucidity of knowledge " (the masculine element) and " the passion for living " (the feminine element) are, he says, though often opposed to each other " parts of the same system, the same game, the same field of love." They are, in fact, two poles in our natures and, to be properly alive, we must live alternately at either pole. What is novel and disconcerting in Mr. Empson's attitude is chiefly his unusual awareness of this alternation and his treatment of the shift from thought to feeling, and from feeling to thought back again, as something that can be consciously manipulated.

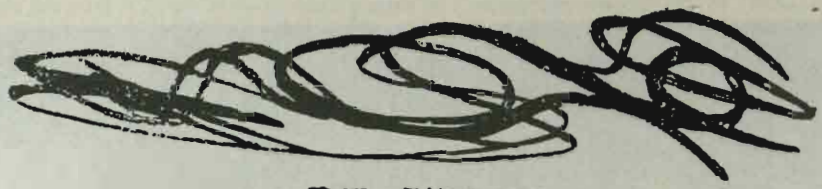
II

Mr. Empson's approach to criticism is based, then, on the assumption that I can train myself as a reader at once to respond sincerely (without, for instance, letting irrelevant private feelings or unreasonable expectations set up unnecessary interferences) and to examine my responses in a detached way, while I have still a vivid, detailed, and accurate awareness of them. The response and the examination, ideally, alternate; in fact, in the proper reading of a poem, they are likely to take place with apparent simultaneity (one should be aware of the poem, not of the different levels from which one is tackling it) and though one can sort out response from examination in one's remarks about a poem, it is difficult, and perhaps not helpful, to do this, harshly, for oneself, in one's actual experience of a poem. One thinks about the poem, perhaps, chiefly after one has read it, but one goes back to it while thinking to check up whether what one is thinking of is really there, and at the same time one does not read the poem with a firm determination not to think, yet. The examination, in a sense, is latent in the response just as the response implies the pattern that is drawn out more explicitly in the examination. I do not know whether Mr. Empson himself would accept this way of stating things, but these statements are a valid way of extending his kind of approach so that it can be useful to people whose temperaments contrast with his own. A certain delight in abrupt changes of gear, for instance, *is* a mark of Mr. Empson's own temperament; he enjoys the slight jar: I for my part like to ease myself very, very gently indeed from feeling to thought, or from thought to feeling.

Extended in this way, Mr. Empson's kind of approach surely is a generally valid one. The general validity of his specific method in this book is more doubtful, for the method is a very sharp tool, which is likely to cut clumsy fingers. Its successful use depends on a kind of tact, which Mr. Empson eminently possesses, in perceiving which of several sets of varying possible interpretations of a passage are relevant to its total effect, and which are not; and, indeed, not only on that tact but on a sound historical scholarship. I shall give two examples from Mr. Empson, in one of which, I think, his scholarship keeps him right, and in the other of which it perhaps, in some degree, fails him. The first



DESIGN by JOAN MIRO : POEM written on the plate by RUTHVEN TODD : 1947

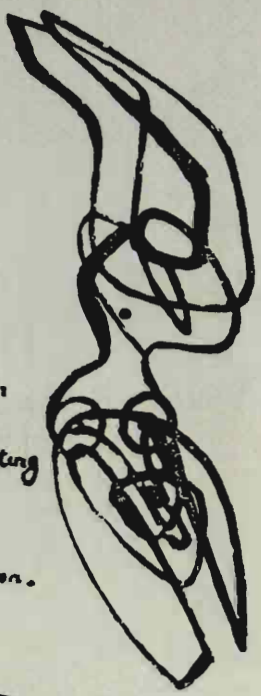


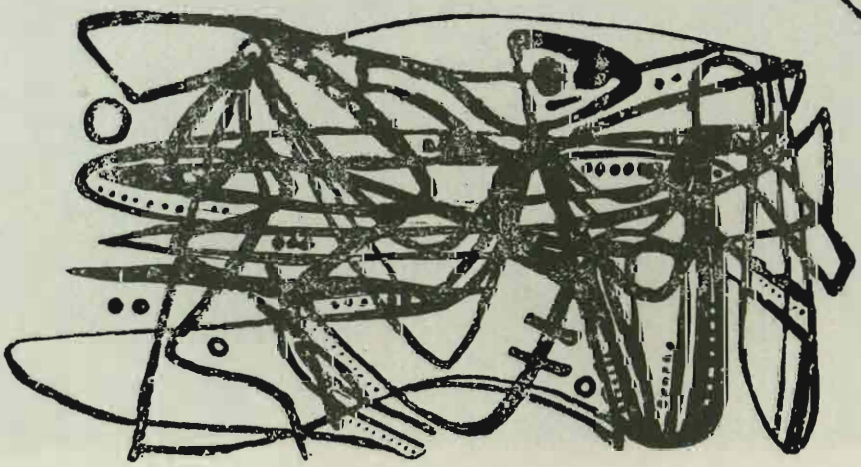
THE ENGRAVER

for Bill Hayter

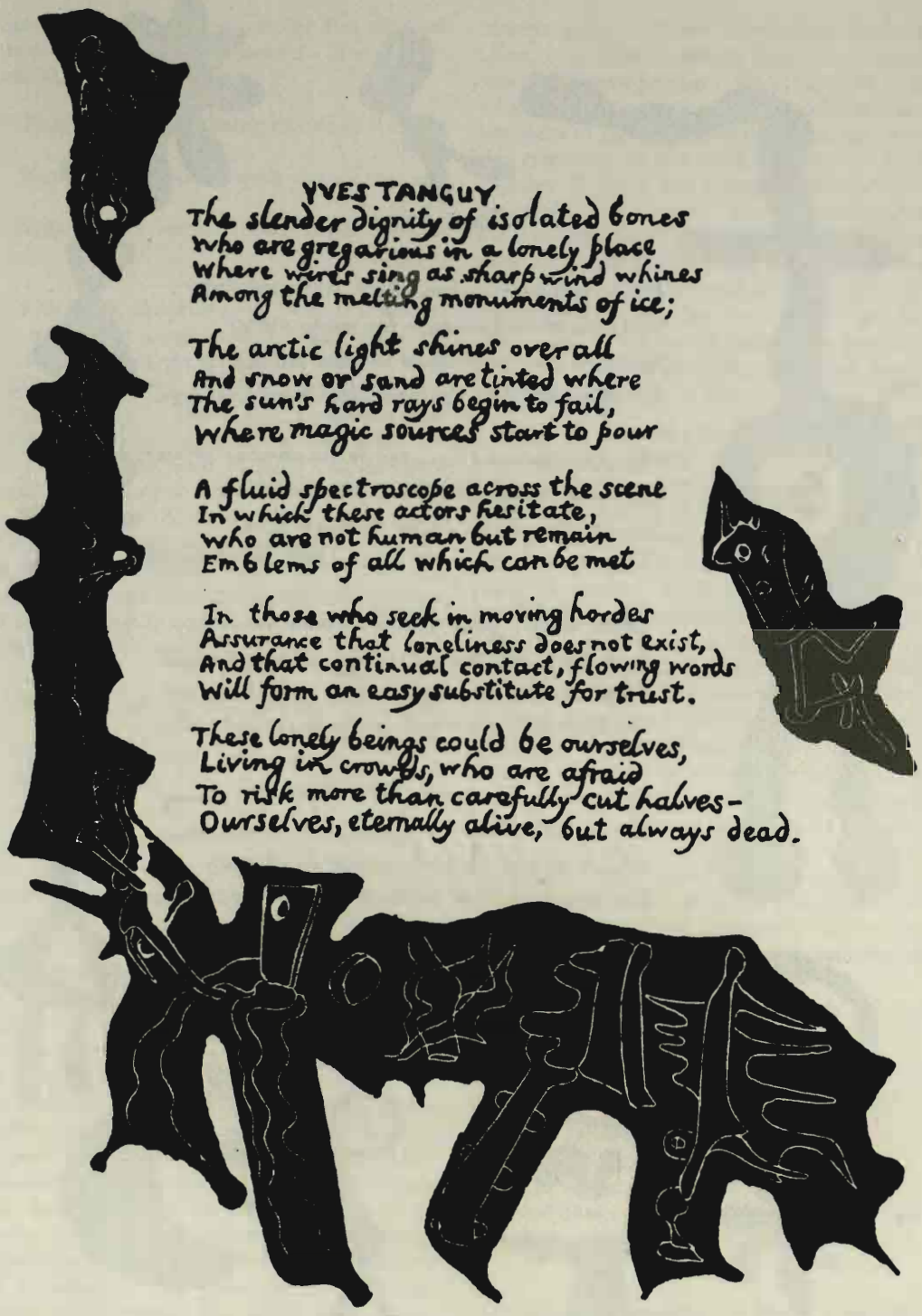
Incredible patience, and the mastery of tools,
Materials, and the bright surface of the plate
Combine to break or to lay down new rules
And from dull matter suddenly to create
Something which had not been before; the skill
Of hand moves in expanses where mind,
Eye, imagination — call it what you will —
Seeks out the riches it will never find:

Always there is tomorrow and the copper waiting,
Extending its invitation like a gilt-edged card
Requesting the pleasure of artist and material mating
In a strange joy, where easy becomes hard,
Where knowledge and control compel the intention
To blunt sharp edges on the keener edges of invention.





DESIGN by S. W. HAYTER : POEM by RUTHVEN TODD : 1947



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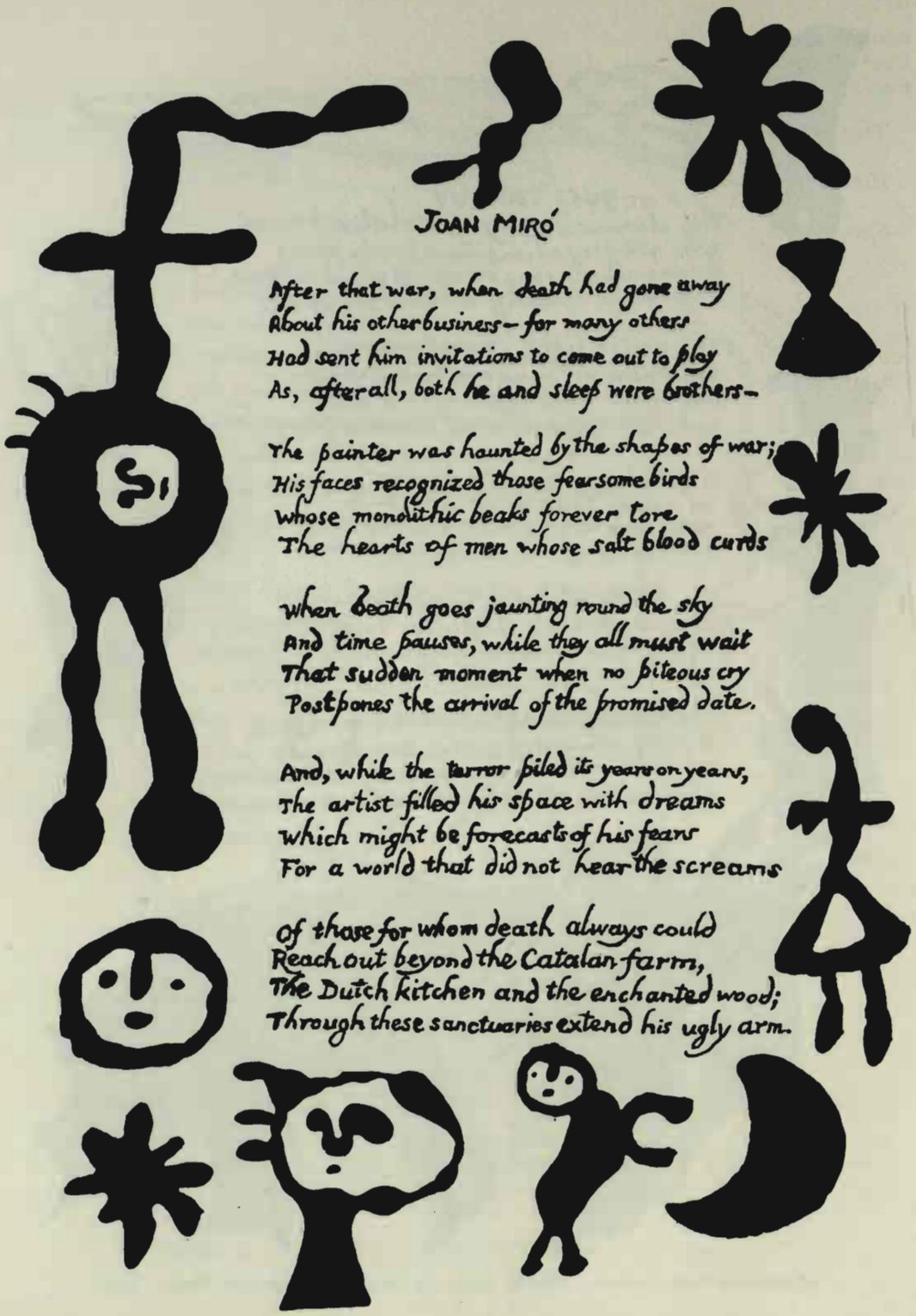

DESIGN by JOAN MIRO : POEM written on the plate by RUTHVEN TODD : 1947

example is a comment on the last of these three lines from a famous Shakespeare sonnet,

> That you yourself being extant well might show,
> How far a modern quill doth come too short,
> Speaking of worth, what worth in you doth grow,

of which Mr. Empson says: " one is bothered by a modern usage which would take it " (the last line in the passage) " alone: ' and, talking of worth, *are* you worth anything now, frankly ? ' This is not an Elizabethan idiom, and was certainly not intended, but its coarseness is hard to keep out of one's mind "—because it fits in with other things in the poem. A reader here, using Mr. Empson's method, and lacking his knowledge of Elizabethan idiom, might have been led astray. On the other hand, into this passage of Dr. Johnson's, about which he has a page of analysis,

> What murdered Wentworth, and what exiled Hyde,
> By kings protected, and to kings allied ?
> What but their wish indulged in courts to shine,
> And power too great to keep, or to resign ?

Mr. Empson, I think, has read far more complication and subtlety than are really there because it has not occurred to him how precise and detailed the historical allusions are. Wentworth and Hyde are not dragged in as mere types. Wentworth *was* " protected " by King Charles I against the enmity of the Commons: Hyde *was* " allied " to Kings, because his daughter had married the Duke of York, later James II. Hyde was exiled precisely because he wanted to " keep " his power as Lord Chancellor after Charles II had got sick of him. Wentworth was murdered (which is Johnson's way of saying exposed to the malice of the Commons, impeached and executed) because he insisted on " resigning " his power over the King, rather than expose the King to his own unpopularity. If we have these facts in mind, it is difficult not to find this a rather straightforward passage. Even the third line, which Mr. Empson teases at a good deal, does not seem to me very difficult. The logic and the grammar of the third and fourth lines together, I think, are simply those of, " Eat your cake, and have it," and the meaning of the two lines together is simply, " Both these men were silly enough, one to think that he could keep his power against the King's will, the other to think that he could resign his power and so expose himself to his enemies, and both to think that they could still go on enjoying themselves at Court."

As apart, however, from providing a tool, which in skilled hands can be very useful, Mr. Empson in this volume has drawn attention to a certain quality in poetry of which, before the book first appeared in 1930, everybody had been vaguely, but nobody had been precisely aware. Lyric poets, for instance, have always been aware that there are certain words which seem to be opposites, and even certain states of being which seem to be opposites, and yet that these words and states of being, having a certain polarity, are each necessary for the expression and even sometimes for the understanding of the other. That statement, though true, is too general to mean very much at a first reading, but for instance two pairs of such words (or of such states of being) are " joy " and " pain," and " love " and " death." Mr. Empson illustrates this point in quoting from Crashaw's " Hymn to the Name and Honour of the admirable Sainte Teresa ":

> O how oft shalt thou complain
> Of a sweet and subtle PAIN.
> Of intolerable JOYES;

> Of a DEATH, in which who dyes
> Loves his death, and dyes again.
> And would for ever be so slain.
> And lives, and dyes; and knowes not why,
> To live, But that he thus may never leave to DY.

Immediately afterwards, he quotes a use, on

a quite different level, of the same polarity, by Dryden:

> The Youth, though in haste,
> And breathing his last,
> In pity died slowly, while she died more fast,
> Till at length she cried, Now my dear, let us go,
> Now die, my Alexis, and I will die too.

Polarity is not ambiguity: we do not find anything puzzling in this use of opposites. Ambiguity begins, perhaps, when there is a certain polarity, not between two terms, but within one term. An ambiguous term, for instance, an eminently ambiguous term (and probably an eminently ambiguous state of being) is " love." We recognise Crashaw's poem and Dryden's little song as both being concerned with love: one of the polarities of love is a vertical one, between high and low, and we recognise at once that Crashaw is dealing with love on a high, Dryden on a low level. Crashaw is mystical, Dryden is bawdy. Yet we may begin to be rather puzzled when we notice that Crashaw can (like Saint Teresa or St. John of the Cross) find an expression for high love only in terms of low love: it is *because* he knows that his intention is all right, that it is an edifying intention, that Crashaw is able to write with such unction and warmth. Dryden, on the other hand, who has no such edifying intention, has to preserve the decencies by a brisk and business-like manner. In Mr. Empson's words, he is " bringing a direct and unassuming attitude towards sexuality into relation with the heroic manner of his serious plays in which people do indeed die for one another rather easily." The metaphor about dying is " one of these mutual comparisons which benefit both parties; the natural act is given dignity, the heroic act tenderness and a sort of spontaneity . . . the joke is rather against human pretensions than human sentiments; there is no suggestion, after all, that they would not really have died for each other." The poet, in fact, dealing with love at a low level, must make use of high comparisons; similarly, the poet dealing with love at a high level must make use of low images. Crashaw, says Mr. Empson, " was content to use sexual terms for his mystical experiences, because they were the best terms he could find." One level, in fact, must reach out to the other, and this suggests that we are not dealing here merely with contrasting applications of a single word, but with a real polarity in a state of being. Perhaps the idea of love ever existing *merely* at the high level or the low level is itself fallacious. In mysticism, there is a kind of sensuality: the mystic seeks joy, seeks pleasure raised to a degree of concentration and completeness where it becomes another kind of thing. In the most ordinary promiscuity, on the other hand, there are elements of the high love: a certain renunciation, a certain surrender of one being to another, a certain acceptance of risks. So if we think we ever know exactly the level at which the word " love " is used in any given context, we are perhaps deceived : for perhaps the word cannot be used, and perhaps the state of being does not exist, at a simple, single level. " We limit the sense of a word, we shut it in, we isolate it; but there is nothing," says Tour du Pin somewhere, " whether word or being, that is really closed."

There are, of course, other sorts of polarity within the term " love ": that, for instance, between desiring and possessing. Such a polarity one would describe as horizontal rather than vertical, in that we wish to possess a thing on the same level as that at which we desire it. Archbishop Sharp, when he was being murdered by the Covenanters, died reciting this strange couplet of George Herbert's,

> Ah, my dear God, though I be clean forgot,
> Let me not love thee, if I love thee not,

which seems to depend for its effect on this horizontal polarity. This is an example of the sixth, or most complicated but one, of the types of ambiguity that Mr. Empson can find in poetry: the type " where a statement says nothing, by tautology, by contradiction, or

by irrelevant statements ; so that the reader is forced to invent statements of his own and they are liable to conflict with one another." Let us consider, bearing in mind the notion of horizontal polarity, some of the statements that a reader can invent. They are themselves pairs of oppositions. Bearing in mind the fact that George Herbert was a devout Anglican clergyman, and using such information as we may have about seventeenth-century theology, we can start off from the pair: " Do not let me desire you, if I do not possess you," and, " Do not let me possess you, if I do not desire you." A clergyman might have expressed this pair more conventionally as, " Do not let me arrive at the blessed kingdom unless I travel by the hard road " (" Damn me," Mr. Empson puts this more vividly, " if I don't stick to the parsonage "), or " Do not keep me to the hard road unless there really is a place prepared for me in the blessed kingdom." He might, if he had been a little later than George Herbert, and had studied the Jansenist controversy, have expressed the pair as, " Do not let me possess your grace, unless I already desire it," or, " Do not let me desire your grace, unless I already possess it." A modern man might express the pair in the very humble statement, " Don't, out of mercy, accept my love as true, unless it is true—who am I to judge ? " or in the very proud and petulant statement, " Of course, my love is true, and if you are so unkind as not to believe in its truth, I'm not sure that I want to love you any more." (But there is a deep ambiguity in life, deeper than language can deal with handily. If we apply the last couple of statements to some merely human relationship, we see that the first, apparently humble, strikes us as a little smug, the second, apparently proud and petulant, as concealing a real humbleness, and as being a more genuine statement of love).

The deep ambiguity of this passage (which becomes more and more striking, the more we elucidate the passage) is based, I think, on a profounder ambiguity than any linguisitic one, the ambiguity of the human attitude towards God. The seventeenth-century believer was told that he had to " work out his salvation with fear and trembling," but at the same time he was told that God knew from all eternity whether he was saved or not, and it was difficult for him to walk the narrow tight-rope between presumption and despair. He would at times feel pretty sure that he was saved, and at other times pretty sure that he was damned: he would feel often that the last act of the play was written already, and that in giving him the illusion of free will, the illusion of making up the play as he went along, God was, in a sense, cheating. A certain covert resentfulness would therefore sometimes mingle with his language of adoration; or, on the other hand, his expression of his obligatory fear and trembling could become very conventional and could fail to disguise an excessive inner security. " The play, in the engineering sense " of the word " love " in this couplet gives us the whole swing of that pendulum. To Archbishop Sharp, bleeding to death, the words might well, as Mr. Empson says, " open up into extraordinary vistas ": they would condense all the ups and downs, all the backward and forward movements of his whole spiritual history, and if there were several ways of taking them, it would be a last act of humility to leave it to God to choose the right way. . . . It is because life is like that, that Mr. Empson's book is important: putting a finger on the shifts, and the shiftiness, of words he has put a finger on the oscillations of the human mind and heart, on our odd self-adjustments to reality.

III

I hope I have conveyed my feeling that, in competent hands, Mr. Empson's method of examining a poem is a handy and delicate instrument. It does not, of course, supersede the ordinary ways of experiencing and judging poetry. If one thinks of criticism as mainly concerned with judgment, there may be even a case for saying that it is not strictly a critical method; but it is a method which enables a reader to examine his experience

more closely and thus, in the end, to refine his judgment. Mr. Empson, in his new introduction, himself brings this point up. "The judgment indeed," he says, "comes either earlier or later than the process which I was trying to examine. You think the poem is worth the trouble before you choose to go into it carefully, and you know more about what it is worth when you have done so." He also points out that, though a poem may be in a sense an eternal object, therefore demanding an eternal judgment, still that eternal judgment is not for us to give. All judgments that we can really make are in some degree tentative and revisable. The judgment of the artist himself on his own work is not final and the judgment of no subsequent age on him can be final either: "this final 'judgment' is a thing which must be indefinitely postponed." Our experience, both of life and literature, as it grows and enriches itself, is perpetually open to re-examination and our judgments are therefore perpetually revisable. "Judge not, that ye be not judged": the gospel precept, I think myself, is as valid for critics as for other people. It means that we should abstain from making final judgments about ourselves or other people. (And a judgment about a poem is, I think, always, in its final intention, a judgment about the poet: where a judgment about some work of art of another kind, for instance a building, may be not a judgment about the architect as a man but simply about his competence in his profession.) The precept does not, of course, mean that we should abstain from making tentative and revisable judgments, for without such judgments life would be impossible. Mr. Empson's attitude in this matter seems to me to show the sound good sense that underlies his ambitious structures of method. It is one more reason why young critics should get this book. For there are many of these today who like to make judgments, not only before they have examined their experience, but before they have had their experience: there are critics (like Mr. Grigson on Dylan Thomas, George Barker and Miss Sitwell) who examine at great length their actual failure to respond. And the more rash, and hasty, and passionate such critics are, the more, as a general rule, they like to assume that all their judgments are final.

NEW FRENCH POETRY : A PARIS LETTER

From DAVID GASCOYNE

The revue *Fontaine* has recently published a number (62) devoted principally to a survey of the poetry of the younger generation in France; that is to say of the young poets whose names have emerged here most unmistakably from the general constant blur of poetry-publicity during the period since the War ended. The most immediate impression that one is apt to receive from *Fontaine's* summary of the situation is one I should incline to describe as rather a muddle; and in the middle of the muddle is a big noise vehemently pretending to make sense and intermittently throwing out phrases such as " *la revolution de la jeunesse !* "—" *deuxième phase de conquête : l'organisation économique de son oeuvre* "—" *avance dans une matière nouvelle, réelle, ou le départ à zéro.*" Round the outer edges of the muddle a few solitary figures appear to be attracting attention to somewhat byzantine poetical by-products of a certain aloof elegance of bizarre ingenuity. The situation should perhaps be examined a little more seriously than this; though I assure you that seriousness is wasted on any examination of the noise I alluded to: it is labelled *Lettrisme* and is immensely serious, aggressively up-and-coming and utterly absurd, in my opinion, even if this opinion be taken for a sign of my approaching middle-age and complete imbecility. *Non mais* is the only further comment I will deign to make on this outrageous and piffling phenomenon: *Non mais*—as though indulging in puerile and hooliganish noises had not long since been totally discredited as a mode of literary expression by the lamentable demonstrations of the semi-official verbal noise-makers to the youthful Fascist State, the erstwhile Italian Futurists.

It is agreeable to record, by way of relief, the debut and immediate apotheosis of Olivier Larronde, one of the most brilliant and genuinely gifted of the representatives of young French poetry. His first book, *Les Barricades Mystérieuses*, is full of exquisite ingenuity and ingenuous exquisiteness; some of the best poems it contains will perhaps prove to be permanent contributions to 20th Century French literature. Olivier Larronde is scarcely twenty, but his refusal to profess pre-fabricated convictions, his disciplined technical virtuosity, his candid good-nature, should be sufficient to persuade the perspicacious that the voice heard in these poems may be among those from whom we can expect the authentic and necessary poetic utterance of the second half of the century. The subject-matter of poetry does not at present appear to present to Larronde a problem demanding his principal attention; when it does so, his poetry may become more mature. Of the subjects of the poems in *Les Barricades Mystérieuses*, one can at least say that they are deliberately chosen, and that they are not pretentious, but perhaps a little too complacently jejune. The budding roses of Larronde are not, one hopes, without a thorn.

If I do not devote as much space here to speaking of Larronde's equally though quite contrastingly gifted contemporary, Henri Pichette, that is because I have just been writing an article to appear elsewhere in which I have attempted to do justice to the hectic experience Pichette offers to the audience at present flocking to the Théatre des Noctambules to see (and hear) his first dramatic work, the poem called *Les Epiphanies*. This remarkable production has so many advantages over the only other work of Pichette's that he has so far published, examples of a series which he calles *Apoèmes*, that I would prefer to say of the latter only that they strike me as appearing to constitute a factitiously hysterical manifesto in favour of evading the problem of how to write poetry for the printed page.

I should like to draw attention to a new poem of outstanding importance which, although published here not more recently than October, 1946, has not yet as far as I know been brought to the attention of more than a few English readers. It is the magnificent long latest work of St.-J. Perse (whose *Anabasis* is well known in England through the wonderful translation of it by T. S. Eliot). It is called *Vents*, and comes as the successor to *Pluies* and *Neiges* which, together with the *Poème à l'Etrangère* and the title-poem, make up this poet's previous collection, called *Exil*.

Grandiose incantatory evocations of a power of spiritual regeneration and creativeness incalculably greater and deeper than contemporary man's, the four contrasting movements of *Vents* explore the mysterious territories situated towards the far extremes of the great cardinal directions. Visionary landscapes of an exalted austerity and vast scope are unfolded before the reader's inward gaze, which is led to see them as it were against or through a transparent screen made of the constant pressure of high wind. Perfumes of strange earths and foliage, strong heart-rousing odour of unexplored ocean, of salt and of sand,—freshness on the forehead, hair blown straight back like the wings of a helmet—; an overpowering nostalgia is gradually stirred up by the accumulating strophes of each section of the poem, by means of a subtle art and a poet's craft which is the result of thirty years' research and practice. This nostalgia becomes identical with the élan which is the force determining the structure of the poem, the form of which is that of a series of fresh departures on ever the same adventurous trek, sped by the same prayer and exhortation ; and this élan seems to carry us with it and towards the conclusion of each section of the poem, as with the irresistible onrush of a cyclone, to lift us up right out of our habit-dulled, second-rate everyday twilight, at last to leave us hovering where lucidly we may look down on the outspread primordial lands of man's absconded world.

Anyone interested in studying the work of St.-J. Perse will find in the series of articles devoted to him by Maurice Saillet in the last four numbers of the revue *Critique* a great deal of material providing an invaluable aid to criticism (Nos. 17, 18, 19, 20).

Among the new collections of poems published during 1947, the most important is probably *Hymne*, the latest volume of the *Œuvres Poétiques* of Pierre Jean Jouve (I only say " probably " in order to avoid seeming too uncategorically dogmatic on the subject). As it is impossible to deal adequately in a paragraph or two with any of Jouve's books of poems, I will conclude this reference to him by borrowing a sentence from M. Saillet's study of St.-J. Perse which would be equally appropriate as a comment on the work of Jouve :

> " Avant même que l'on puisse préjuger de son dernier terme, il semble qu'elle franchisse les bornes de l'époque et gagne le plein ciel de la postérité."

During 1947, Pierre Emmanuel, a poet in whose earlier work more of the influence of Jouve may be found than in that of any other important poet to have appeared since 1939, has published : *Chansons du Dé à Coudre*, a collection of nearly 200 very short poems, constituting the record of a process of spiritual discipline, such as is to be found in the works of certain of the Christian Mystics such as St. John of the Cross or St. Theresa of Avila. The last poem but one in the book has only seven lines, which I will quote, as to my mind they speak more eloquently of the Great Unnameable than do most of Emmanuel's longer and more literary religious poems :

" *Dieu*

" *Le nom le plus simple*
Le seul commun

" *Les autres noms*
Ne veulent rien dire
Si ce qu'Il veut dire
Nous l'oublions."

Another book published during 1947, the *Morceau Choisis* of Tristan Tzara,

comes as a timely and welcome reminder of the fact that its author has for the last thirty years steadily been becoming more assuredly one of those few poets whose work cannot be left out of any serious account of the vicissitudes of healthy poetic inspiration in our time.

Great is the marvellous intransigeance to which the pages of Tzara's 7 *Manifestes Dada* (some extracts from which are to be found in this selection from Tzara's writings, dating from 1916 to 1946) still so provocatively testify. These extraordinarily explosive pages give rise to the reflection that a religious prophet, come like Isaiah to denounce the present and announce the future in the name of a Transcendent power no longer known to men, would in the modern world be unlikely, after all, to turn out to be a venerable bearded ancient figure with a big booming voice of intense solemnity. He would surely be as sophisticated, superficially, as the most business-corrupted of the latter-day pharisees and other living dead whose everyday-world of hideous and pitiable nullity it would be a part of his mission to denounce. Indeed, Tristan Tzara, in his Dada days, wore *two* monocles. If there are among modern poets men who may be considered to play a role similar to that of a prophet, in the sense I have just given the term, they are undoubtedly aware that the children of light must be as subtle as serpents and able to see right through the bluff and the not after all so remarkably subtle manœuvres of the children of brilliantly neon-lit darkness. Tzara, in his Dada role of prophet, puts on in public, in ironic deference to the prevailing mode, his own kind of ferociously expressionless mask, appearing perhaps to repudiate all intention of attempting the communication of meaning; but the profoundly established motive behind all the angry torrents of nihilistic absurdity, the hysterical horseplay, the Groucho Marxist truculence, is the defence of the transcendent reality of the Unknown and the Unspeakable, against the universal corrosion of reality by the pestiferous repetitive triviality with which man has long been attempting to contaminate and thus domesticate it. Only those too easily misled by the trumpery yet so seductively decorous sacerdotalist façade still advertising itself today as the expression of religious sentiment, can fail to recognize in Tzara's dadaism, as it is expressed in the following passage from one of the Manifestos which he wrote in 1918, an indication of the most exigently uncompromising refusal to be associated with the methods by means of which the modern world has hypocritically betrayed true human spirituality, a potentiality still everywhere almost entirely ignored and wasted:

> " Il y a des gens qui ont dit: dada est bon parce qu'il n'est pas mauvais, dada est mauvais, dada est une réligion, dada est une poésie, dada est un esprit, dada est sceptique, dada est une magie, je connais dada.
>
> " Mes chers confrères: bon, mauvais, réligion, poésie, esprit, scepticisme, définition, définition,
>
> " *Voilà pourquoi vous crèverez tous* et vous crèverez, je vous le jure.
>
> " Le grand mystère est un secret, mais il est connu de quelques personnes. Ils ne diront jamais ce que c'est que dada . . . "

In a world of shams, everything authentic must eventually constitute a scandal. The Dada movement was a short-lived attempt to speed-up the outbreak of this scandal in everyday life as well as in contemporary literature (which has become so perfect a means of evading the possibility of a sharp and disturbing confrontation of actuality and spiritual conscience, by bringing them together all the time under purely " artistic " auspices for the purpose of " intelligently " detached and generally inconclusive discussion or digression).

There is another book by Tzara which I should mention, published not long ago, the dramatic poem entitled *La Fuite*, time

for the recognition of which by the French literary public has evidently not yet come, but which surely will be recognized as an important contribution to the international movement towards a renewal of the stage-play through the ever unclassifiable mode of utterance which is that of Poetry. Another and truly younger generation, whose emotions will not have been muddied or dried up by over-indulgence in the artificial stimuli of partiality and selfish protagonism, will doubtless rediscover it and find it deeply moving. Poetry by a man of Tzara's great gifts and integrity, when it is concerned with the expression of the permanent elements of the human situation (this play is about the eternal drama of departure and farewell, the tragedy of the affectionate Father whose home the hero, his son, has to leave in order to satisfy the inner necessity which drives him to seek to know the world through personal experience of it) has invariably proved enduring; and the poetry of which *La Fuite* is a mature example, is worthy of being regarded as occupying a rightful place among the most serious works in contemporary European experimental literature.

* * *

There are many other poets whose work I should have liked to refer to, but I shall have to postpone mention of them until the next Letter on French Poetry I write to you. To complete the enumeration of the principally important books published in 1947 to be found mentioned in the present Letter, I must, however, though without commentary at least refer to the following: the *Choix de Poèmes* of Jules Supervielle, the *Ode à Fourier* of André Breton, René Char's *Le Poéme Pulvérisé*, and Paul Eluard's *Poésie Ininterrompue*. Also, though some superficial eyebrows may be raised, Jean Cocteau's puzzling piece of virtuosity if not exactly of resistance, *La Crucifixion*. That so many rich works should appear in the same year shows that modern French poetry is still very much alive and flourishing.

I could write at some length about any of the five above-mentioned books; but will instead refer briefly, by way of conclusion, to a double event in the literary history of the year 1947 which has a significance relating it to the annals of poetry in a way which has probably been more or less ignored, at least in England: I mean the awarding of the Nobel Prize to André Gide, and the celebration in the same year of the 50th anniversary of this author's *Les Nourritures Terrestres*, which is surely above all else unmistakably the work of a poet, besides being the work of a man possessed of one of the most sensitive and rigorous moral consciences of our time. Once a poet, always a poet, is an adage true, I think, of Gide, no matter how much his moral and more prosaic preoccupations may subsequently have distracted him from purely poetic expression. At all events, I am happy to be able to take the opportunity of expressing on this occasion, in the pages of *Poetry London*, the respect, admiration and affection of one of the no doubt numerous English admirers of Gide's writing and integrity who would be glad to add their congratulations to the avalanche of homage which he must already have received from all over the world.

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TRISTAN TZARA: *Morceau Choisis.* Bordas. 190 fr.

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JULES SUPERVIELLE: *Choix de Poèmes.* Gallimard (NRF). 305 fr.

ANDRE BRETON: *Ode à Fourier.* Editions de la Revue Fontaine (Collection *L'Age d'Or*). 550 fr.

RENE CHAR: *Le Poème Pulvérisé.* Editions de la Revue Fontaine. 550 fr.

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POINTS OF VIEW

Messrs. READ, GUTTERIDGE, GRIGSON AND WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN

by HUGH GORDON PORTEUS

Collected Poems. HERBERT READ (FABER, 8/6).

The Traveller's Eye. BERNARD GUTTERIDGE (ROUTLEDGE, 5s.).

The great poetry of the world exists in its own right. Its values are not altered by the sort of evidence that proves Homer to have been a woman or Shakespeare Bacon. Whether it comes from Stratford, Srinigar, Chang-Au or the island of Mytilene is irrelevant. It is always by Mr. Nemo Anon, the great master of a thousand styles. There is another kind of poetry which is written in so private a tongue that it cannot be understood until the biographers and the psychologists have deciphered its vocabulary and grammar. In this category lies, for example, the bulk of the verse of William Blake ; becoming annually a little more intelligible. But the certain sign of good poetry is that it communicates something immediately, that it refines and extends the reader's experience even before it is properly understood. In this sense Mr. Read and Mr. Gutteridge are good poets : though neither equally good nor equally articulate.

It is difficult to write with detachment about Mr. Read's work, partly because it is difficult to detach his work from Mr. Read, or to detach the metaphysician from the poetry. It is arguable that Mr. Read is rather a metaphysician in his verses, and a poet in his art and literary criticism. In his criticism, Mr. Read gives the impression that the object matters as little as a head mattered to Cézanne : (or it is like reading Rilke on Rodin.) But as I have been accused of pursuing Mr. Read the critic with an envenomed pen, I should like to acknowledge my reverence for Mr. Read the poet. Even his verse is among the little contemporary verse one wishes to re-read occasionally. Its surface is pale and thin ; but there is something *underneath* the surface. The re-issue of some of Mr. Read's best poems in a new edition offers an occasion for a new reading. Endorsing all that Miss Kathleen Raine wrote in P.L.XI, with her intuitive clairvoyance, I add my diffident postscript.

Mr. Read recently suggested that creative artists should employ their leisure time earning a living at some such occupation as lens grinding. I see Mr. Read in the figure of a speculum-grinder who has made this, not only his whole-time occupation, but his art. Around him lie discarded distorting mirrors, microscopes, spyglasses, crystal balls and rose-coloured monocles, guaranteed to offer the curious visitor deceptively enchanting glimpses of a cruel world.

And gems : Precious stones beautifully cut but never set. For Mr. Read is also a manufacturer of images. As a poet, he still belongs to the Imagist school. The rest is metaphysics, not poetry. There are very few complete poems in this book, and they are of a Japanese brevity. But they are quite unlike Japanese or any other poetry. Any influences seem to be rather negative than positive : the restraining influence of Eliot, with his verbal asceticism, of Pound with his auditory austerities, of Wyndham Lewis with his visual precision. Eliot's presence can be detected in " Garden Party ";

Pound's in " The Pond " and " Meditation of a Lover at Daybreak." These are early poems, belonging to the period of Ezra's *Lustra*. But there is a special aseptical vocabulary : " Lymphic winds," " Menstrual sea," " Labile life of blood," and lips :

> " like pale rubber valves
> Distended by a wayward pulse."

There is a special sort of poetic contraception, and of understatement ; as of the returned warrior who cannot speak of what he has seen ; as with " the Refugees " :

> " They do not weep :
> Their eyes are too raw for tears."

But a distinction is to be drawn between failure of communication due to the reader's inadequate experience, and failure due to inadequate poetic articulation of experience. Mr. Read is, for example, overfond of the word " ecstasy," a symptomatically "mystic" word that saves the effort of pursuing emotion, beyond the vague apprehension of the romantic idealist, into concrete terms. Thus, in " The Mutations of the Phœnix " :

> "Why should I dwell in individual
> ecstasy? "

is followed by the articulate statement :

> " Mind wins deciduously,
> Hibernating through many years.
> Impulse alone is immutable sap."

But a few lines later, the tide is a " muted ecstasy " and the stars a " final ecstasy." And in the " Lament of St. Denis," the sun shines " in midnight ecstasy."

Yet in these poems the effect is of great tension, or of a cold sweat of suppressed excitement. It is quite extraordinary to reflect how dramatic these longer poems are, despite their freedom from all the accepted technical tricks. It is as if Mr. Read had made a bet with himself to eschew all rhetoric, all coloured and sonorous words, almost all rhyme, and make his poems with a very little weak romanticism and a very little dried reason, studded sparsely with a few translucent green images, like angelica on a cake. It is a poetry informed with the small cold fire of the glowworm. Or it is like the twinkle that leaks to us, many light-years late, from a distant star of some magnitude. In this subdued atmosphere of hush and chill you can hear all Mr. Read's little pins drop with the chink of pennies, and the plainest statements become invested with drama,—as in " The Nuncio " :

> " Starr was the name of the one we
> waited for.
> He entered presently, removing his
> tiara
> With the economical gestures of a man
> entering his own house."

And the simplest metaphors take on, in their context, a peculiar and phosphorescent beauty :

> " See where the curl'd surf clashes
> in a wreath, in a running crest,
> in a fan of white flame ! "

That is well seen, well felt, and well put. It invites comparison with the clear, clean, descriptive poetry of Mr. Gutteridge :

> " First is the coastal plain
> Closed by the sash of surf along the
> beach—
> Hostilities of breaking waves—each
> Rucked up and hooded like a plover—
> Storm at the yellow sand,
> Climb for the foreshore vainly
> over and over."

All Mr. Gutteridge's verse is as clear to eye and mind as that, neatly turned and without blemish. *The Traveller's Eye* covers landscapes (with moving figures) in Britain,

India, Burma and Madagascar. Sometimes he seems to borrow a botanical eye from Mr. Grigson, reporting his observations with detailed precison and exquisite mimicry :

" As the seven swallows that sit
Dropping their pellets on the saxifrage
That wags its racket seed pods
in the wind
Rotting brownly from the centre . . ."

All these pictures have the brilliance and clarity of Indian miniature paintings, and a hard tactile quality, whether of scenes in the tropical jungle or in Yorkshire; something deep and crisp and even :

" Along the borders the delphiniums
and lupins flowering;
The figtree dark against the wall ; the
cautious, brown
Intrusion of hens, the cold
Wood of the chair; and old
Sounds and hedges that build
Especially these 20 acres into an
ivory tower."

Often, in reviewing a pair of books by the Platorchion method (which I have here carefully avoided), one thinks : how much each could learn from the other. In this case it seems to me that a combination of the talents of Mr. Read and Mr. Gutteridge would result in a new book of poems by Mr. Grigson, which would be read with respect only perhaps by Mr. Julian Symons, Mr. Ruthven Todd, and myself. But there is no doubt that each has something (in the colloquial phrase) that the other hasn't got.

FAT LADY AT THE CIRCUS

by George Barker

The Soldier by Conrad Aiken
(Poetry London).

V Letter by Karl Shapiro
(Secker & Warburg).

Essay on Rime by Karl Shapiro
(Secker & Warburg).

Poems by Dunstan Thompson
(Secker & Warburg).

This review is supposed to be about the new poems of Conrad Aiken, Karl Shapiro and Dunstan Thompson, but it is really about that non-existent hippogryph American Poetry. In the preceding issue of this magazine Mr. Julian Symons observed "the very general ignorance prevailing in England about American Poetry " and, oh, what he said. In common with almost all English critics who labour under this prevalent ignorance about American Poetry, Mr. Symons remarks the " vigour and vulgarity " of the beast. I do not know in what exact sense Mr. Symons employs the terms vigour and vulgarity, but I do know that if he refers, as, presumably, he ought to be referring, to poetic vigour and poetic vulgarity—the Whitman and the Villon—then I go so far as to give him the lie in his entirely personable teeth. Contemporary American Poetry is vulgar only because, like the noveau riche, it is imitative, and not because it is plebeian : and only vigorous—e.g., Kenneth Patchen—when it is so abominably bad that the badness has to be held responsible for the vigour. Most of the best American poetry is anæmic, anglophiliac and academic (Robert Frost, Yvor Winters, Allen Tate,) and when it is not these things it is bombastic, incompetent and bloody : (Kenneth Fearing, Kenneth Rexroth, Kenneth Patchen). I can see only two American poets and these are Wystan Hugh

Auden and Ogden Nash. All other American poets, a step or three behind their English prototypes, expend most of their energy breathing elegant imitations down the necks of their English models. (Conrad Aiken down William Shakespeare's, Karl Shapiro down the pre-war Auden's, and Dunstan Thompson down I will not say whose.)* Frederick Prokosch is thus the typical or archtypical American poet. His characteristic is that it is not only impossible to believe he is American, but impossible to believe he is at all. I should define him as a point without magnitude halfway between Geoffrey Chaucer and a former squash champion of France.

American Poetry is a very easy subject to discuss for the simple reason that it does not exist. Almost anything, as I am demonstrating, no matter how fatuous, can be said about it. For me it resembles the Fat Lady at a Circus : there's a lot of her but not much is desirable. If you really want American poetry you should go to the revues and the advertisements. They have a purpose and their eyes are bright with it.

* George Barker? Editor *Poetry London*.

SEA-SCAPE, UNDERSEA-SCAPE AND SOME MORE

by Norman Nicholson

The Lamp and the Veil by Vernon Watkins (Faber 6/-).

Lament for Strings by Wrey Gardiner (Grey Walls Press 6/-).

The Lamp and the Veil has received much praise since it came out two years ago, and I would be among the first to endorse that praise since Vernon Watkins seems to me one of the most exciting poets of my generation. But since so much has been said about his powers of orchestration and his fecundity of imagery (which is not, as in the case of some others, a mere repertoire of images), I would like now to consider the problem of form which is aroused by this volume, consisting, as it does, of three poems of "some length." In all three Mr. Watkins has made a bold attempt to discover a form of his own, and has not relied, as in *The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd*, on a traditional story for the framework.

Sea Music for my Sister Travelling exploits all the qualities we expect from Mr. Watkins: abundant imagery, rich vocabulary, sonorous scoring. The whole poem is written with immense technical virtuosity—we get the ebb and surge of the sea, and every variety of sea-image and sea-symbol ; and, in the waters, we constantly have glimpses of reflections of the burning town in which the poet is fire-watching as he writes. But how are you to read it ? If you abandon yourself to the flood of the imagery, you end up so battered and rolled, so tossed and shaken, so spiritually sea-sick, that you are quite incapable of appreciating the sea-scapes and under-sea-scapes that are all round you—at least, that is how I feel. If, on the other hand, you drop anchor firmly in the intellect and try to survey the seas calmly and critically, what do you find? Sentences a page and a half long of which the end presumes that you have forgotten the beginning ; passages of superb imagery which, when analysed, become most uncomfortably-mixed metaphors :—

"O come, great deaths,
Sea-deaths on sea-deaths, now:
Light tapers in the tombs

Of the cowled sea's retreating
catacombs,
Moon-herded waters, cattle for the
carrion-crow,
Pricked, goaded to the deep,
Dark, prehistoric sea-bed where life's
monsters sleep."

In the first poem in the volume, *Yeats in Dublin*, Mr. Watkins seems deliberately to be avoiding this tidal-wave style. Here a plain account of an interview with Yeats is written in verse which suggests (quite legitimately) that of Yeats himself, yet never falls into parody. There is here a modesty, a holding in check, a laudable desire not to show off in front of the old poet. The result is readable, interesting and graceful, but the form of an interview is too casual to give real shape to the narrative. Moreover, the discipline of this poem keeps some of Mr. Watkins' special gifts so firmly in hand that they scarcely appear at all.

It can be seen, therefore, that the form of neither of these poems is really satisfactory—though that of *Yeats in Dublin* is by far the least dangerous for the development of Mr. Watkins' style. In the third poem, however, he has found a much more congenial form. *The Broken Sea*, a lyrical sequence, is at once an elegy and a nativity poem. Its theme, stated simply, is that in the midst of death we are in life. The sea again appears as an image of destruction, but not only of destruction, for it is now remembered that Venus, and, indeed, all life, came from the sea. Moreover, it is less of a literary sea than that of *Sea Music*—it is a sea that has been looked at :—

" Waves, hooded, raging, thunder,
hiding contagious guilt,
Tossing, high on the shale, the hard
and scribbled stones."

The poem recognises the plight of man, but is not without hope :—

" The blossom blossoms anew:
Man breaks from his own death."

And in the final passages, addressed to a child born in Paris in 1940, there is a fine and heartening appeal to the true potentialities of man, ending with a splendid last line which any poet might be proud to have written :—

" You wake, and great recollection
trembles away."

Here are Mr. Watkins' real powers, and if to them he can add the directness of *Yeats in Dublin*, what a fine poem he may give us.

Wrey Gardiner deserves the gratitude of all the younger poets—he reads our MSS. and to do so needs not only time and patience but also something like the vocational enthusiasm of a nurse. No-one can know better than the editor of a poetry magazine how many words can be used to say so little, so that it is not surprising that when such an editor himself turns to poetry he is rarely loquacious.

Mr. Gardiner is no exception ; and his poems, for the most part, are small, concise and lyrical. Not that he is without a touch of rehetoric, as when he laments the decay of the world in which he lives :—

" My world is a strange distortion
of fact,
Primeval slime and sloth of art
Where no man dares become the
thing he will
For lack of love and the bitter
singing."

But such poems, however much one may agree with the sentiments, are not among his best. His best, indeed, exist at the edge of this same destructive sea (to borrow Mr. Watkins' imagery), like tiny, delicately-turned, delicately-coloured shells :—

" Striding through the fog we see
The trees in the damp square
Like giant weeds in the quiet sea
in the still winter air."

Even if that were less lovely than it obviously is, we would have to admire the courage of a poet who could write anything like it after returning the day's batch of stamped addressed envelopes.

JELLY FISH OR FOSSIL ?

By KATHLEEN PAINE

Collected Poems by SIEGFRIED SASSOON (FABER, 10/6).

Fossils of a Future Time ? by W. J. TURNER (OXFORD 8/6).

If the title of the second book belonged to the first, I would say yes. Fossils must have some shape and solidity to begin with, some hard substantial structure in them; many lovely jelly-fish, sea-cucumbers, and even advanced vertebrates like skates and dog-fish, disintegrate leaving not a trace in the sedimentary rocks, and we must at least grant that Sassoon's poems have harder bones—or at least shells—than have W. J. Turner's drifting, tenuous verses that seem to disintegrate even as they float through our minds.

Siegfried Sassoon belongs to a deeper geological stratum, so to speak, than does W. J. Turner. Mr. Sassoon did not stop writing, and writing well, after the 1914–18 war, and yet his range is determined by the traumatic experience that stamps the poetry of Edmund Blunden and Wilfred Owen, and which is Herbert Read's and Robert Graves' starting-point as poets, although in their cases the shock seems not to have been traumatic. Robert Graves and Herbert Read have outlived the last war as poets in a way that neither Blunden nor Sassoon have done.

What it was that two poets underwent was clearly something more than war and its horrors. It was also the set of terms, those sentiments and attitudes that the time could muster in young minds, all unprepared. There is, in Sassoon, the realism of corpses and barbed-wire, that makes you sicken as you read. There is, also, the consciously manly style of the officer of the last war, the boy fresh from the public school, speaking the language of the sportsman, the blue-eyed extravert with unquestioned standards of decency, shattered by this horror from the underside of humanity. It is by virtue of this unmistakable stylistic and idealogical stamp that Sassoon's poems perhaps qualify as fossils. His afterthought, his final adjustment, is one of irony—the world never looks the same again to the once blue-eyed extravert, and he lashes out against the people at Lords, in Piccadilly, at the club, and in all the other places where, but for the lifting of the curtain on the underworld implied by these people's values, he would have been at home, and happy.

The experience of poets like Sidney Keyes flowed in quite other channels. Sassoon, Blunden, Owen, Graves and Read had prepared them for the corpses squelching in the mud, told the facts of modern war. Of all these poets, Siegfried Sassoon is perhaps nearest to the Galtonic type. He is not the greatest, but he is probably the most representative, both in style and in experience. As such, students in the future will no doubt return to him.

W. J. Turner is certainly not the mouthpiece of anything so universal and recognisable as a generation plunged into a modern war. I do not know what he can be said to be saying, and his poems have often a centrifugal quality, attributing statements to imaginary persons with whom he (the poet) implies that he does not agree; of listing the things that other types of men (such as scientists) are supposed to think, and then shifting away silently. In one poem, W. J. Turner appears to be challenging the view that poetry is made of words, and claiming that it is made of ideas. But I cannot discover what the ideas were with which he was making poems. The psycho-

logists tell us that ideas only exist as verbal entities, and one must conclude that clarity of thought and precision of word usually go together. W. J. Turner would perhaps have defined the aims of poetry in terms of beauty, for love of beauty seems to be one of his affirmations. Beauty, however, seems to come to him as an experience of feeling, as in music, more often than as a concrete image. Only occasionally is the happy symbol attained, as " . . . the sea

Is like a mirror dimmed with breath; "

or in the poem *Life and Death*, the bones in the sand are contrasted with the vulture in the sky:

" The desert panting in the sun,
Curled delight into a sigh;
Airless burning for its breath
Gaped the blue and stainless sky.

Palpitating flew away
A shadow smaller than a hand,
It was he who flew that lay
Stretched upon the desert sand."

I may be unjust to W. J. Turner, being myself particularly insensitive and tone-deaf to the feelings that inspire his poems. For to me they seem empty, and for the most part meaningless, although, to be sure, on a highly sensitised level. Siegfried Sassoon's responses are poster-crude in comparison, but, to me, infinitely more valid and convincing. He is earthy, and his corpses, trees, houses and landscapes have the solid contours of sensed material things. W. J. Turner's watery verses are elusive without, as a rule, being lyrical; generalised without being profound, and confine the scope of poetry (in the name, presumably, of beauty) to a range of human experience too narrow to satisfy either the intelligence, the imagination, or the moral sense. And yet W. J. Turner must be granted his due. Within that range, one senses that he could hear half-tones and quarter-tones of aesthetic harmony that, if he seldom transmutes completely into words, he often suggests. Like his *Man Who Ate the Popomack*—a play that, at least, one does not forget—this poet lived and moved in a too private world.

POETRY AND NATIONALISM

by Francis Scarfe

The Hungry Grass by Donagh MacDonagh (Faber & Faber, 7/6).

Mr. MacDonagh, who is well-known as an Irish poet, enchants us with his Irishness but compels us to reconsider the whole question of nationalism, national conventions and traditions in their relation to poetry. One of the major aspects of Symbolism was that it identified itself with nationalist movements in Belgium, Ireland and elsewhere. But those national literary revivals succeeded, in the main, because by allying themselves with French Symbolism, they took account of Europe and produced work which could be judged on a European scale.

This no longer seems to be the case with Ireland. We have come to expect Irish poets to write work which is rebellious, undisciplined, superstitious and jaunty. These are, of course, not the best aspects of contemporary Irish poetry: they are, indeed, those aspects against which Russell and Yeats reacted. All these qualities constitute a certain provincialism which is not without its attraction. But are there not, also, more particular elements which we have come to regard as clichés, components of the stage-Irish-poet's wares, by which he almost appears to caricature himself? Such items

are the coffin and the wake ; the mixture of sacred and profane love in a sort of cheerful blasphemy ; hearty reminders of one's place of origin ; below-stairs realism ; disillusion with the great ; packing the carpet-bag for the grand trip to America ; the long and bitter historical memory ; the occasional tipsy reel through the streets of Dublin.

We are disappointed to find all these superficialities in Mr. MacDonagh's work. Provincialism is written all over it :

> " Dublin made me, not the secret
> poteen still."

We find time and again the blasphemous amour :

> " And all who saw me said ' That is
> Cassidy
> who abandoned God for a girl's
> cheek.' "

Here are the coffins :

> " I said, ' They've wept
> In every house there over a shining
> coffin
> Since death has broken in at every
> door.' "

The carpet-bag is ready :

> " What mettlesome wind will carry
> me out of Ireland
> Blown like a feathered speck fast into
> foreign countries."

The self-pitying—yet sometimes moving realism breaks in :

> " But life is cellars and basements,
> attic rooms,
> Gossip in lamplight, scurry in the dark,
> Wage-cut and bonus, the price of
> bread and meat."

Someone, from time to time, as Yeats put it, must laugh at the great :

> " The great names are down,
> Recorded only in a huckster's shop."

As for the wraiths of History and all the wrongs of Ireland :

> " This is the world they feared and
> planned against,
> Portland and Pitt, Beresford
> Castlereagh ;
> Against this town Cooke plotted,
> Higgins spied."

And we conclude with the occasional roaring blind :

> " I'd fill up the house with guests
> this minute
> And have them drinking in every
> room
> And the laughter wrecking the
> garden quiet,
> City men dressed in a sober style . . ."

All this is not MacDonagh's fault. It is perhaps natural that he should reflect all these things which are part of the air he breathes. It is particularly noticeable that the same themes are to be found in the poems he has rendered from the Irish : the laying-out of the bridegroom in " The Day set for our Wedding " ; the blasphemous love in " Till Christmas Come " ; the boozing in " A Hundred Men Think " ; emigration in " Dónal Óg," and so on.

It is practically impossible to export this poetry out of Ireland with the hope that any critic can distinguish between Mr. MacDonagh's own talents and the thoroughly bad convention in which he is writing. Maybe—and I think so—his main quality is that he can handle these common-currency themes with a certain freshness ; maybe he is on the right side, in particular, by the liveliness of his idiom, so close to the speech of the common man that it tends at times to overflow his metrical patterns. The poet's absolute honesty of mind cannot be in doubt:

he writes of a friend killed in the Spanish War: " His body stopped a bullet and no more." In a long poem which must challenge comparison with Yeats' " Easter 1916 " there are some moving and passionate declarations —but we will continue to prefer the hard restraint of Yeats. He succeeds best in one or two short, sometimes epigrammatic utterances, such as " The Invitation," "A Parable," "Jason," " A Myth."

English readers are bound to like MacDonagh's poems because the background and implications are so familiar. But serious readers will welcome the book largely because it will shake them out of any complacent ideas they might have about nationalism and poetry. In Scotland Hugh MacDiarmid and one or two others have realised that heather and haggis are not enough, that good contemporary Scots poetry must assert itself through its idiom, while otherwise striving to keep contact with Europe. The better Welsh poets show signs of a similar realisation. It is to be hoped that Ireland will also realise that poetry cannot long remain a local game and that we, who have also long memories, expect something better from the home of Yeats and Swift.

THE AMERICAN KID

by Nicholas Moore

The Kid by Conrad Aiken
(John Lehmann).

It is rarely that publishers' blurbs give any very valuable information about the quality of the books they are trying to sell ; but in this case the first two sentences of the blurb unwittingly underline the reasons for the comparative failure of " The Kid." " Mr Aiken," it states, " is one of America's most distinguished poets, a poet remarkable for his delicacy and psychological vision. In *The Kid*, however, there is a robustness and vigour, a freshness of attack altogether unexpected." One might add to this that it is altogether unwelcome.

It is quite true that Mr. Aiken is a distinguished poet, and a poet who has by no means received the attention he deserves, particularly in this country, where there is still an inclination to regard everything serious that comes out of America as necessarily phoney. It is more than a pity, then, that we should be introduced to another work from America under the recommendation of robustness and vigour, perhaps the only two qualities that—albeit with a certain distaste and distrust—are ordinarily admitted to an American author. And it is particularly unfortunate in the case of Mr. Aiken, whose best poems simply are not vigorous and robust, but show him, as the blurb quite rightly states, " a poet remarkable for his delicacy and psychological vision."

What could be finer in its way than this ?

" Beloved, let us once more praise
the rain.
Let us discover some new alphabet,
For this, the often-praised ; and be
ourselves,

The rain, the chickweed, and the
burdock leaf,
The green-white privet flower, the
spotted stone,
And all that welcomes rain; the
sparrow, too,—
Who watches with a hard eye,
from seclusion,
Beneath the elm-tree bough, till
rain is done."

But this is worlds apart from the " robustness and vigour " of *The Kid*, and it is just those very qualities that destroy it as a poem. Mr. Aiken's gifts—and he *is* gifted—simply do not run to anything so vulgar as robustness and vigour, but he obviously wishes they did. *Brownstone Eclogues* was an attempt to write something more popular, and, though it contained some good things, it was by no means wholly successful. *The Kid* seems to be another. But it is for the ironic, austere, and beautiful poems of *Preludes for Memnon* and *Time in the Rock* that Mr. Aiken will be remembered.

The Kid has an attractive theme, of which Mr. Aiken in a less public mood might have made much. He is an essentially philosophical and contemplative poet, but he has unfortunately come to the conclusion that to be popular his poem must approach as nearly as he can manage it, something like a rousing ballad. (Can it be that he has Stephen Vincent Benet's *John Brown's Body* at the back of his mind ?) This is absolutely fatal to Mr. Aiken as his talents do not lie in this direction at all.

That is not to say the *The Kid* is a wholly bad poem. Naturally Mr. Aiken's characteristic qualities do come through here and there there are some pleasant fancies and incidental descriptions, as—

" . . . But mind's delight
embracing these and all, he moved
deliberate in a world he loved.
Angelick pengwins trod the shore:
fearless he heard the lyon's roar:
pale honeysuckle ringed the page,
where, in a noon, he read an age."

Elsewhere, the exigencies of rhyme and metre become too much for him. The verse gallops along skilfully, but does not leave any very lasting impression. *The Kid* is a symbolical figure, representing finally America itself, though the original kid is one William Blackstone, a mysterious 17th Century figure,

a " solitary bookish recluse," a graduate of Cambridge University, who had voyaged to America between 1620 and 1630, bought land from the Indians, and lived alone, writing a book, which, if it ever existed, was destroyed with his library in a fire. It seems to me much more could have been made of this semi-legendary figure by treating him in a less rousing vein, and one that was more essentially in keeping with his known characteristics. Instead Mr. Aiken equates him with other American legendary heroes of a more adventurous and rumbustious type, and the solitary thinker is lost.

CORRESPONDENCE

11th December, 1947.

Sir,

In your eleventh number you have been too occupied digging a grave for me (alongside the graves of my new companions in death, Mr. F. L. Lucas and Mr. John Sparrow) to notice much of what I wrote in my *Polemic* article on Dylan Thomas. Or you were too busy faking a case—and a very flimsy one—to contain the corpse. You cannot see " why Messrs. Eliot and Thomas . . . are said to lack ' education in art, severe selection and control, some knowledge of what to reject.' " No, you cannot see it, because it was never said—except of Dylan Thomas, about whom, upon the evidence, it is as correct as it would be ridiculous about Mr. Eliot. If you so misread the simplicity of an article, you could hardly do anything but misread any poem, good or bad, before hurrying off to plunge your head into the existential, or whatever else belongs to the moment.

You must excuse me for saying that your comments are so muddled and liquescent that there is hardly another one solid enough to be picked out of the pail and examined. It is hardly worth, for example, telling you that what you think is *cynghanedd* in a line of Dylan Thomas's is not *cynghanedd* at all, that *cynghanedd* is a strict " classical," formal usage, that a " free " use of it would be something as impossible as a free heroic couplet or rhymed blank verse. Still, one can feel the *drift* of your remarks. The axis which runs through *Poetry London* is that all poems are poems and equally worth printing. The only axis is to have no axis, beyond that faith in muddle and contradiction which has made *Poetry London* the most foolish (if representative) periodical of its time.

Perhaps it will be useless to commend to you Mr. Eliot on Milton—that poetry of the next fifty years (and the next numbers of *Poetry London*) " might learn that the music of verse is strongest in poetry which has a definite meaning expressed in the properest words." Or perhaps you are shovelling out another hole for Mr. Eliot and writing another epitaph.

Yours, etc.,

GEOFFREY GRIGSON.

Mr. Grigson's pre-war interest in a certain kind of poetic *reportage* like his present preoccupation with antiquarianism and British wild flowers, is well known. Unfortunately these latter-day rambles of Mr. Grigson's in the highways and byeways do not appear to refresh his understanding of poetry other than that which he happens to favour at the moment, or of the criticism of poetry.

Mr. Grigson alleges that I have misread his *Polemic* article. The following paragraph, though, I agree, susceptible of being misread on account of Mr. Grigson's habit, so familiar to readers of *New Verse*, of disguising a failure to appreciate the real qualities of a poem with abusive language, ill manners and a patronising and petulant tone, seems to be fairly clear in its silliness.

" Occasionally flashes of the solid and viable in Mr. Thomas's mud-bubbling make it plain that with some education in art, some severe selection and control, some knowledge of what to reject, he might, and might have achieved some few poems which could be read with pleasure and profit, and without contempt. And that is true of other poetries, such as the poetry of George Barker. Or take Mr. Eliot. Mr. Eliot—though ' the last agonisant of the Romantic Agony ' who deserves reading—is a poet of great ministrative intentions, who has allowed these intentions to be muddled and vitiated by the seduction of heresy . . . the grave suppressive seigneur and the self-deluded playboy of poetics unite into a phenomenon of paradox; and one remembers how many extraordinary geese of the *avant-garde*, unreadable flatterers of themselves, purveyors of diabolism, ex-

positors of unreason Mr. Eliot has guaranteed and championed in his time, as if he had argued to himself that normal expositors had become charlatans with nothing to say, so that abnormal expositors, all who are *avant-garde*, must be striving to deliver themselves of the viable."

But indeed, it matters little whether one misreads this type of criticism, which is, of course, not criticism at all but a form of braggadocio based on half-understood facts and specious argument. "Indeed, as one reads through much English poetry now, its marks one realizes to be *artlessness, that is in the vanity of subserving one's own person, or lack of education and indifference to the methods of poetry . . .*"

". . . Eliot could not withstand the charm of being individual and solipsist in form," Mr. Grigson continues airily. (*Solipsism* : view that the self is the only knowable reality.)

In view of these remarks it was perfectly in order for me to say that Mr. Grigson accuses Mr. Eliot, among others, of "artlessness" and "lack of education." In all poetry the properest words and the form will, of course, depend on the meaning that is to be conveyed. For this reason Mr. Grigson is allergic to Mr. Dylan Thomas, whose meaning apparently has eluded him. Mr. Thomas's meaning is of course implicit in his choice of words and in his form.

As regards the question of *cynghanedd*, however, it is just possible to set Mr. Grigson to rights. *Cynghanedd*, as I pointed out in POETRY LONDON 11, was a system of alliteration, which was used by Gerard Manley Hopkins and others, and in the four lines quoted from the "pointless disorder" of the Ballad of the Longlegged Bait, Mr. Grigson evidently missed a characteristic example of it. I suggested further that assonance, alliteration, internal and half-rhymes are the key to Thomas's prosody. Therefore, since Mr. Grigson does not appear to understand this either, it is hardly surprising that he so confidently misconstrues Mr. Eliot's prosody and meaning. And it may be expected that he will perform the same feat with those of any other poet. (ED. *Poetry London.*)

HOMEGROWN

Jean Sartre's book (and all such-like books) does not merit the honour of translation into English because, brilliant though it is in some ways, it contains much that is typical of second-rate French literature which is alien to the fresher and more normal English outlook on life.—Reader in *John O'Londons*.

'WE MUST LOVE ONE ANOTHER OR DIE.'

"What Auden intended the line to mean is obvious to any denizen of the thirties—it is merely his characteristic way of saying that there must be a revolution to remove the causes of international hatred, otherwise man will exterminate himself in a series of wars."—Roy Fuller in *Our Time*.

SEVEN AND A TANNER

I need do no more than mention the Selected Poems of Teresa Hooley (Cape 7s. 6d.), because here again is a poet already sufficiently established to be assured of her audience. One can say of her lyrics as she says here:

Today I saw a butterfly,
The firstborn of the spring,
Sunning itself upon a bank—
A lovely tawny thing.

I saw a dandelion too,
As golden as the sun;
And these will still be beautiful
When all the wars are done.

—Well-known Critic in *John O'Londons*

NOVEL '48

The situation from which Monsieur Gautier has taken his departure on his journey of compassionate penetration into a man's mind and soul is one which would earn three lines in the morning paper as a Shorter News item.—Publisher's announcement in Rodney Phillips' catalogue.

STONEHENGE

"I am not implying, I hope, that literature is monolithic."—Roy Fuller in *Our Time*.