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Reviews of Some Current Poetry

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REVIEWS OF SOME CURRENT POETRY

- Poems*, by Stefan George; translated by Carol North Valhope and Ernst Morwitz. New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1943. \$2.75.
- Poems*, by Rainer Maria Rilke; translated by Jessie Lemont. New York: Columbia University Press, 1943. \$3.00.
- The Trial of Lucullus*, by Bertolt Brecht; translated by H. R. Hays. Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions (The Poets of the Year), 1943. Wrappers, \$.50; boards, \$1.00.
- Some Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin*, translated by Frederic Prokosch. Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions (The Poets of the Year), 1943. Wrappers, \$.50; boards, \$1.00.
- New Poems*, by Dylan Thomas. Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions (The Poets of the Year), 1943. Wrappers, \$.50; boards, \$1.00.
- Last Poems of Elinor Wylie*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943. \$2.75.
- The Sun at Noon*, by James Hearst. Muscatine, Iowa: The Prairie Press, 1943. No price indicated.
- Steep Acres*, by Daniel Smythe. Washington: Anderson House, 1942. \$1.50.
- North Window and Other Poems*, by Hortense Flexner. New York: Coward-McCann Inc., 1943. \$2.00.
- The Vineyard Keeper: a Lyric Drama Based on the Song of Songs of Solomon*, by Harry H. Fein. Boston: Bruce Humphries, Inc., 1943. \$1.50.
- This, My Earth*, by Sage Holter. New York: Gotham Bookmart Press, 1942. \$1.00.
- Primer for America*, by Robert P. Tristram Coffin. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943. \$2.00.

The number of translations from German poetry has been immense in recent years and, in view of our war with Germany, perhaps ironical—but a practical demonstration of the internationalism of good poetry. Among the modern German poets, Stefan George has been mentioned many times in English; but I believe these translations, accompanied by the original German text, are the first substantial publication of George's poems in the United States. Eric Russell Bentley in a review of the book in *Partisan Review* indicates that the translators have not offered George's poems of "homocrotism" or "fascistic aestheticism." The translations give us little impression of a poet as great as several competent critics have thought George to be. The poems in English are very pre-modern in diction and, often, in sentiment. On the basis of these versions, one would place George as a neo-romantic, with a little more urgency of point of view than in the better English verse of 1880-1910, and with only a little more realism. The German text, so far as I can read it, seems more modern in diction. The translators seem to be rather fair to the sentiments and ideas, but to deliver them with poor verse feeling. The religious poems, great in quantity, are strangely isolated in feeling for a modern poet; the reason is perhaps the one given in the introductory essay by Morwitz—"through his new experience he had been removed to a spiritual level other than that of the world about him"—or perhaps the attitude indicated by the last line of "Man and Faun," translated "Only by magic, Life is kept awake."

Whereas George seems definitely to precede modern "experimentalism" and contact with the French Symbolists, Rilke is cautiously in touch with this modernism. This tendency probably explains, in part, his recent popularity and the many translations which have appeared within a few years. For this collection Jessie Lemont selects poems preponderantly from the early work. She offers the "easy lyric" aspect of Rilke and is unfair to his mature work. Thus her translations are a personal selection and must be judged upon their success as English lyrics. Her performance is better than fair, creating a number of times at least passages of good English verse.

Of the German translations considered here, in many ways I admire most the translation by H. R. Hays of Brecht's *The Trial of Lucullus*. The play is immediate in that it is a condemnation of force and of fascist methods. Also it is of interest as a work in the new medium of the radio play. But in addition to these immediate interests, it is a well-sustained play done in a good English version.

An interesting comparison in translation is that between Pierre Loving's Hölderlin poems (Little Blue Book No. 724, Haldeman-Julius Co., Girard, Kansas) and those of Frederic Prokosch. Loving emphasizes a neo-Greek feeling and gives us rather good poems in the H. D. and Richard Aldington Imagist manner; Prokosch gives us a more traditional romanticism in his own lush, rhetorical, and sensuous style. I am inclined to like the Loving poems a little better; but Prokosch's are interesting and are certainly closer to the original.

Many critics have come to admire Dylan Thomas a great deal. I confess that I cannot follow his poems well. But it appears to me that his complexity is a verbal one almost entirely, masking a really uncomplex manner. Thomas is accomplished in this mode, a mode which is minor and radical and which is capably handled by Yvor Winters' strictures against modern experimentalism.

Last Poems of Elinor Wylie is a miscellaneous collection, with a good many styles, including some without the metallic surface which was her developed mannerism and which betrayed her by its surface satisfactions. One could mention the early "Written on the Flyleaf of John Webster's Plays" and a few others, but even these are not among her few poems which may hold some interest for a time yet.

James Hearst and Daniel Smythe are nature poets in that their matters and sentiments are largely concerned with human responses to natural scenes, to landscapes, trees, animals, and the soil. Both have lapses into easy attitudes which do not invite struggle, analysis, paradox, "earned" sentiments. But each does an occasional good poem of the type—James Hearst in "The Other Land" and "Home-sickness" from his thirty-eight page pamphlet finely printed by Carroll Coleman, Daniel Smythe in "The Pheasant" and some others from his ninety-five page book.

Hortense Flexner is capable of writing such a poem as "October Corn":

Rusty soldiers,
Still drilling in broken ranks,
With your bent bayonets,
Your yellow flapping arms,
You cannot make me believe
You have won the battle.

In justice to her, there are better poems in her book, but really few of a remarkably better quality. Harry H. Fein's *The Vineyard Keeper* is called a lyric drama (based on the Song of Songs of Solomon), I suppose, because it is mostly lyric and not dramatic. The lyrics, where closest to Biblical imagery, are good, if not particularly arresting. Generally there are too many lapses in verse ability and too much repetition of flagging lines. Sage Holter's work is on a mixture of Irish and New Mexico backgrounds. There are three or four fair efforts in a book of ninety-six pages; the remainder is a poor mixture of sentimentality, inept imagery, and a failure to stop a poem when it is really done. Robert P. Tristram Coffin's *Primer for America* is a super-patriotic "quickie," what used to be called jingoism. In it, for example, barns in America are called "American Cathedrals." That is on page eleven, and I don't think you'll go any farther. The last page is numbered 166, if you want to know how much of it there is.

ALAN SWALLOW

Have Come, Am Here, by José Garcia Villa. New York: The Viking Press, 1942. \$2.00.

American Writing 1942: the Anthology and Yearbook of the American Non-Commercial Magazine, edited by Alan Swallow. Prairie City, Illinois: The Press of James A. Decker, 1943. \$2.00.

The Twittering Self, by Robert Brown. The Swallow Pamphlets: Number Six. Gunnison, Colorado: Alan Swallow, 1943. \$.25.

Crooked Eclipses, by Ruth G. Van Horn. Gunnison, Colorado: Alan Swallow, 1942. \$.75.

Pagophila, by Sylvia Wittmer, with a foreword by the publisher. Gunnison, Colorado: Alan Swallow, 1943. \$1.50.

Have Come, Am Here is a book of new verse by José Garcia Villa, a native of the Philippine Islands. One does not derive from Mr. Villa's verse the true pleasure that comes of reading first-rate work. Most of the poems appear to "spring" from a pseudodramatic conflict between a cruel, nay-saying God, and Eve, the inspiration of "the beautiful word." Several poets and critics, and even one philosopher, have expressed unqualified admiration of Mr. Villa's glittering surface lines and momentarily interesting tangential sparkle, and more especially of his "influences." It certainly is true that Mr. Villa's line seeks to blend the light of "Tiger, tiger burning bright" and an early Miltonic morning in the Garden of Eden before the fall; but, for all that, true idea and deep feeling are profoundly absent. Perhaps Mr. Villa's faults are to some extent those of the critics who have praised him for what is bad in him. It is always easier of course to strike a decorative pose than to stand up to the real thing—but is it worth doing?

American Writing: 1942 is a refreshing and stimulating collection of poems and short stories selected from literary magazines by Alan Swallow. The editor has been very honest in picking for republication only that work which has definitely marked originality and freshness, even though some of the stories, in particular, seem to be the product of very new hands at the art of writing. Three fine pieces of prose fiction out of six is a very good score, however. "A Short Space," by Kathleen Hough,

from *THE NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY REVIEW*; "Goodwood Comes Back," by Robert Penn Warren, from *The Southern Review*; and "A Visit Of Charity," by Eudora Welty, from *Decision*, are first-rate stories. "Goodwood Comes Back" is especially fine and is undoubtedly a work of literature of lasting worth. Perhaps the least attractive piece of prose is that by Walter Van Tilburg Clark entitled "Why Don't You Look Where You're Going?" and reprinted from *Accent*. The story starts off well but ends in a welter of rather disingenuous and overly heavy irony. The best poems republished in *American Writing* are "Penance," by George Abbe, from *Prairie Schooner*; "Force's Joust," by Anna Maria Armi, from *Decision*; "Carnival in New Orleans," by Howard Baker, from *Poetry*; "Elegy: For You, Father," by John Ciardi, from *The Kenyon Review*; "Summer Idyll," by J. V. Cunningham, from *Modern Verse*; "The New View," by John Holmes, from *American Prefaces*; "Query," by Josephine Miles, from *The Southern Review*; "Terror," by Robert Penn Warren, from *Poetry*; and "An Elegy For The U. S. N. Dirigible, Macon," by Yvor Winters, from *Modern Verse*. Of this work the poems which strike one as being of most lasting beauty and permanent value are those by Howard Baker, Yvor Winters, J. V. Cunningham, and Robert Penn Warren. The warm and festive quality of Mr. Baker's piece and the dramatic force of Mr. Warren's poem are thoroughly to be admired and enjoyed. There is one bad poem included in *American Writing*. It is entitled "Suburban Sunset," by Kenneth Fearing, reprinted from *Compass*. Forced humor and newsy comment do not make a real poem. Except for one or two lapses, *American Writing* is full of good things; and its editor deserves warm thanks for exercising so unselfishly his fine and discriminating powers in the interest of new American letters.

The best poem by Robert Brown in his pamphlet of verse entitled *The Twittering Self* (a very bad title) is called "The Brothers: Egypt And Mexico." In this short piece the author succeeds in clarifying and intensifying, to a greater degree than elsewhere in the work, his own vision of beauty and grandeur discovered through the glass of relativity. *Crooked Eclipses*, by Ruth G. Van Horn, is also a work of modest length. One of the poems included, "At Medicine Bow," although short, is both vivid and strong and gives us something of the ruggedness and color of mountains. Unlike Robert Brown and Ruth G. Van Horn, Sylvia Wittmer, the author of *Pagophila*, a book of poems, likes to weave words into textures sometimes too closely knit to be thoroughly enjoyable. Rather often in Mrs. Wittmer's work the effect of fine opening lines is marred by later and regrettable decline into amorphous verbalism. One may well believe, as Mrs. Wittmer seems to, that the sunbeam of many notes is more exhilarating than "the cold, white light of eternity," but after all one must not introduce total eclipse until the poem is ended.

LINCOLN FITZELL