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A REVIEW OF SOME CURRENT POETRY


The Cloth of the Flesh, by Seán Jennett. London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1945. 6s.


Randall Jarrell’s Little Friend, Little Friend ranks with Karl Shapiro’s V-Letter as one of the two best books of poems by American soldier-poets I know of to come from the war. In the volume there is great violence of word and image, as if Jarrell said “God damn, God damn” under his breath as he wrote, feeling a nearly voiceless anger; as if the words had some existence which caused him to use them like enemies in the vague direction of his anger. With this violence we naturally expect to find the ineffectual firecracker:

Yet inside the infallible invulnerable
Machines, the skin of steel, glass, cartridges,
Duties, responsibility, and—surely—deaths,
There was only you; the ignorant life
That grew its weariness and loneliness and wishes
Into your whole wish: “Let it be the way it was.
Let me not matter, let nothing I do matter
To anybody, anybody. Let me be what I was.”
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But we have in return such fine poems as "and Air Force," "A Pilot from the Carrier," "Mother, Said the Child," "The Carnegie Library, Juvenile Division," "The Difficult Resolution," and a scattering of poems in the last fourth of the book. They are a fine achievement and surely worth a fifth or sixth of the space in the last section of Eberhart and Rodman's anthology of war poems; instead, they are represented by a single short poem of extreme interest in violence, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," of which the last line is "When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose." Jarrell's poems frequently extend more than a page; so I shall quote only the last stanza of one, "The Soldier Walks Under the Trees of the University":

When will the boughs break blazing from these trees,
The darkened walls float heavenward like soot?
The days when men say: "Where we look is fire—
The iron branches flower in my veins"?
In that night even to be rich is difficult,
The world is something even books believe,
The bombs fall all year long among the states,
And the blood is black upon the unturned leaves.

Richard Eberhart and Selden Rodman have edited a topical anthology. On the dust jacket the publishers call it "a comprehensive anthology of the world's great war poetry." On the title page, the editors call it "an anthology of poetry expressing man's attitudes to war from ancient times to the present." The editors state the function of the anthology more accurately than do the publishers. Their definition of scope is naturally quite inclusive and quite justifiably includes work by both combatants and non-combatants. And Rodman in his introduction, at least, makes out a good case for the historical "transition in war poetry from the action level to the psychological level." I do not know that the selections support him any more than a selection of poems on almost any topic, and that is slightly. The essentially topical nature of the book may be shown by reversing the field, so to speak, and thinking, say, of an anthology of love poems to show the impact of war upon love. Or one might take the point of view that war is a part of the consciousness of modern living and thus select an anthology of modern poems to demonstrate, in a sense, that there are no non-war poems.

Aside from an irony directed at the conception of the anthology, one must make one other reservation about the book—on selections. A critic must grant the editors the licenses of their taste and not quibble because a favorite poem happened to be left out, but he can quibble about effort. In his introduction Eberhart remarks: "Such a history must give editors pause in their selections of the poets of this war. It is conceivable that those now considered excellent will suffer a diminution of their excellence in the perspective of the future, while writers either little recorded and regarded now, or not known at all, may duplicate a career like Rosenberg's." The difficulty is that the editors, even though aware of this pitfall, have selected very obviously among contemporaries and have made no extended effort to pry about a bit to see if their taste might recognize poems and poets not popularly recognized. There was a number of such poems and
poets, I should like to assure them. Trading upon the fairly well recognized is
the privilege of the anthologist, but it is a vicious privilege of men of the critical
consciousness of Eberhart and Rodman.

In the end the anthology, as with any anthology which does not have a
productive thesis or theme, is valuable for giving us pieces we might otherwise
miss. Eberhart and Rodman have done much of this. Adding to these pieces
the mild historical interest, one feels the anthology is indeed worth having.

I believe that Franz Werfel was right in thinking that his poems might well
outlast his prose. The manner of the poems may be indicated broadly by saying
that they occupy a relation to the poems of Rilke about the same as the relation
of Werfel's prose to the prose of Kafka. The poems are usually traditional, some­
times romantic, occasionally strong in this manner, as in such a fine poem as
"Autumn Song." I think Werfel was very happy in his translator, Edith Aber­
crombie Snow, for the translations come through as good English poems more than
any translations I have seen for a long time. I value the book highly.

Two new books by New Mexican poets are The Grist Mill, by Haniel Long,
and Eleven Lady-Lyrics, by Fray Angelico Chavez. In his book Haniel Long shows
his versatility, for here we have mainly occasional poems. Most of these are very
fine. I especially admire "In Memoriam: H. C.," "Prairie Lark," "May Your
Dreams Be of the Angels," "If Our Great Fragile Cities," "On a Raft," "For Tony,
Embarking in Spring," "What Is the Most Quieting?" and "Now That March Is
Ending." The sensibility which informs these poems of intimate occasion is lucid,
purposive, and filled with an abiding moral humanitarianism. On
the other hand.
I cannot feel that Fray Angelico Chavez' book is worthy of the auspicious beginning
he made in his Clothed with the Sun. He does not get on the page even the
urgency of the religious paradox, but can write simply "Before I find / What
angels see, my eyes / Must first be blind." The section of lighter verse seems to
me the best in the book.

Frequently I get to thinking that a great many of the younger English poets
are all of a piece. A similar manner runs through one after the other: a brittle
surface compounded, I suppose, of Eliot, Owen, Hopkins, and Auden; like Hem­
ingway, beneath the brittle surface a great deal of talk about simple sentiment.
The style can be indicated by a stanza from Jennett:

His flesh shall be my stone, the word he speaks
with no matter how uncaring tongue
my epitaph; his living hours and weeks
my subtle and proclamant song.

The style can be duplicated quite exactly, I'm sure, in the work of a number of
English poets, including some of the Apocalypse group. It is a style with con­
siderable virtue—a sort of communal guard against extravagance of sentiment and
sentimentality on the one hand and against the wilds of the momentary, unmoving,
unrationalized word and image on the other. Thus one does not often see in
this style the magnificent failures or the pitiful failures one observes in American
verse; the poet has a tradition for writing a decent poem. But the pitfalls here
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seem to be that the tradition is not so rich as is available in the history of English verse and that it is easy enough that it frequently breeds quantity, poem after poem which looks, feels, and reads much like hundreds of others. Jennett is one of the best working in this style, and his book presents an evenness of accomplishment which Jarrell's book, for example, does not touch. Yet I do not find in it any poems which can equal the few by Jarrell I have mentioned or a number of those by Haniel Long.

Alex Comfort, though, is an English poet in a different style. His is the blurred image, the incessant movement from word to word with a minimum of interest or attending. The values of Jennett's style are easily demonstrated when placed beside the style of Comfort.

One must approach William Ellery Leonard's posthumous collection with misgiving. A group of sonnets about the love between a man of fifty-seven and a woman of twenty-four! The irony available is tremendous. But strangely enough it is in the poems dealing most closely with the themes of physical love, in the third section, that Leonard does some of the best work. Leonard's sensibility had qualities similar to those I remarked above in Haniel Long. Leonard certainly does not rise adequately to the situation. One could hardly think of a more vulnerable one. Yet the sensibility is there in the poems, and at times one reads the efforts with real admiration.

In its New Classics Series, New Directions presents a fresh translation of Rimbaud's A Season in Hell, together with the French text. It is, simply, one of the necessary books for an understanding of the symbolist movement and of the influence of that movement on more recent poetry. In Brief contains more than fifty very short poems by George Hedley. Hedley does not write with enough concentration for a fine epigrammatic style such as, for example, the readers of this journal have been able to enjoy in the epigrams of J. V. Cunningham. Hedley's poems are thin but occasionally pleasing in a small turn of phrase.

Brief Enterprise is the 1945 annual book award of the League to Support Poetry, the publishing of this annual volume now being done by Dutton's. Aside from Ted Olson's volume, Mrs. Mears presents the best book in the series. The League has chosen to take books of relatively little profundity in conception or ability, but Mrs. Mears' volume moves more in that direction than do most of the League's selections. It is an advance I am happy to see, although I do not feel that there is any considerable success in Brief Enterprise. The poems by Tom Boggs are mainly in what might be called the song tradition, one we normally have to go back to Blake or to the Elizabethans to distinguish at all clearly from another tradition of poetry. In this volume I like "Song" and one or two others. But apparently Boggs commits the error of identifying the song tradition with lack of intensity and a poorly managed metrics. The result too frequently is a poem moving at a low threshold of interest. The posthumous volume of poems by the painter Marsden Hartley shows little to give him a reputation in poetry comparable to the one he holds in painting. The poems are basically good notes for poems but do not often move toward thematic movement and the integration of poetry.

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