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## A REVIEW OF SOME CURRENT POETRY

- The Seven Sleepers and Other Poems*, by Mark Van Doren. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1944. \$2.50.
- One Times One*, by E. E. Cummings. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1944. \$2.00.
- Eloges and Other Poems*, by St.-John Perse; the French text with English translation by Louise Varèse and an introduction by Archibald MacLeish. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1944. \$2.50.
- Selected Poems 1923-1943*, by Robert Penn Warren. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944. \$2.50.
- The Giant Weapon*, by Yvor Winters. The Poets of the Year. Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1943. \$1.50.
- Passport to the War*, by Stanley Kunitz. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1944. \$2.00.
- A Wreath for the Sea*, by Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Arrow Editions and New Directions, 1944. \$2.50.
- An Act of Life*, by Theodore Spencer. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944. \$2.00.
- Domination of June*, by David Cornel DeJong. West Los Angeles: Destiny Editions, 1944. \$1.50.
- Green Vistas*, by Stanton A. Coblentz.. Mill Valley, California, and New York: The Wings Press, 1943. \$1.50.
- Not the Full Harvest*, by Byron Herbert Reece. West Los Angeles: Destiny Editions, 1944. \$1.50.
- Tropic Earth*, by Clifford Gessler. West Los Angeles: Destiny Editions, 1944. \$1.50.
- Waldport Poems*, by William Everson. Waldport, Oregon: Untide Press, 1944. \$2.25.
- The Shape of Memory*, by Winifred Welles; foreword by William Rose Benét; introduction by Louise Townsend Nicholl. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1944. \$2.00.
- Seven Poets in Search of an Answer*, edited by Thomas Yoseloff. New York: Bernard Ackerman, Inc., 1944. \$2.00.
- A Little Anthology of Canadian Poets*, edited by Ralph Gustafson. Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1944. \$1.50.
- And Ever Venus*, by Joanne de Longchamps. West Los Angeles: Destiny Editions, 1944. \$1.50.
- Private Papers*, by William Justema. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, Inc., 1944. \$1.50.
- Love Letter from an Impossible Land*, by William Meredith; foreword by Archibald MacLeish. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944. \$2.00.
- Flight above Cloud*, by John Pudney. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944. \$1.75.
- Poems from the Desert*, by members of the Eighth Army; with a foreword by General Sir Bernard Montgomery. New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1944. \$1.75.

I doubt that we in the United States have seen published, within a comparatively short time, a group of books so distinguished as the first nine I have for review this

quarter. All, though each is different, are fine in one way or another, and all are worth owning.

Mark Van Doren's position in recent poetry, continued and in some ways extended by *The Seven Sleepers*, is unique. Only Robert Frost, I think, has more ability to interest readers of divergent "levels" of approach to poetry, from the reader of the engaging line to the determined critic, but Van Doren's manner is generally more erudite and "literary" than Frost's. Some readers will find in the book poems which seem a little too soft, a little too unrealized in terms of Van Doren's best sensibility; others will find some poems which seem too difficult in thought and manner, too broken in rhythm and involution of movement; yet each will find many poems to admire. Van Doren is always *sensible*, whether on war or on nature; what he says is not wonderfully new, but it is handled in a manner worth our hearing. One may say quite categorically that even the small library of modern poetry which does not contain Van Doren's *Collected Poems*, *The Seven Sleepers*, and perhaps also *The Mayfield Deer* is incomplete.

In *One Times One* E. E. Cummings is not entirely his same old self. There are some important advances in method, particularly; thematically there is little change. These advances are two: (1) An attempt to achieve greater verbal complexity, especially with the pun (many of these puns—"and she gave him a desdemonial," "ten centuries of original soon"—are not too perceptive, but many are fine). (2) Greater use of interruption and qualification to the argument. The satires still seem to me the best, and the book contains what are Cummings' best love poems (indicated by the title theme of "one times one"). At critical moments he still often resorts to his old vice of romantic obscurantism ("and carve immortal jungles of despair/to hold a mountain's heartbeat in his hand," for one example), but in control of this quality, also, he has made real improvement.

St.-John Perse's *Eloges* and the other early poems included in this volume are primitive in the sense that they are realized almost entirely in terms of sensory awareness. Their value is bounded and limited by that intent, but they are poems of remarkable lushness, like early modern and pre-surrealist painting.

Robert Penn Warren's first large collection of poems puts him among the small group of truly distinguished poets of the United States. His style, though in various poems recalling certain poets (Marvell has been a persistent and fine echo in some of the best poems), in the critical places is his own and is carefully managed. His attention is always upon distinguished composition and, largely, upon the theme of regarding the passage of time. The very latest poems, by and large, represent an effort to use methods found in the earlier poems, but upon a larger scale. I cannot feel that they are more successful as a group. The greatest loss has been the move to a more informal structure, which Warren manages as adeptly as any, but which does not provide so solid a base as Warren is able to handle. And the complexity often seems too deliberate. There is some real point in the view that at the moment of composition of a poem, some of this complexity has already been faced and a moment of relative simplicity achieved; and I believe that such an adjustment would strengthen Warren's handling of his major themes. But in this book are a number of poems, including "The Ballad of Billie Potts," "Original Sin: A Short Story," "Terror," "Bearded Oaks," "Picnic Remembered," "The Garden,"

"History among the Rocks," plus as many more of very near this quality, which represent Warren at his best; and this is to say that they are among the permanent acquisitions of our recent poetry.

In *The Giant Weapon* Yvor Winters has selected thirty-three of his poems. A number are occasional in that they are written upon specific occasions in a manner that Jonson and Landor used, and they are worthy of those masters of the genre. Several others are poems on "literary subjects"—"Heracles," "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," "On the Portrait of a Scholar of the Italian Renaissance"—and these are among the finest poems of the type in our time. Finally, the largest group is one in which the "traditional" methods of such work are concerned with contemporary living, with a similar manner but a wide difference of "texture," defying the small compartment into which his critics would like to place Winters' work. There are a few poems, such as "Heracles," "A Spring Serpent," "John Sutter," which I formerly did not greatly admire; but with further reading, I have come to place them among Winters' fine poems. There are still three—"An October Nocturne," "Much in Little," "A Testament"—which I still do not admire so greatly. *The Giant Weapon* contains at least thirty of the finest poems of our time, and I doubt that there are three other poets writing in English today who could select from their work an equal number of poems of an equal quality. I made a similar statement in this magazine about three years ago in reviewing Winter's *Poems* (a volume more inclusive than this one and more valuable, although it lacks the few poems added since that time), and the reading I have done in these years convinces me more stoutly that I am right in this opinion.

*Passport to the War* consists of a selection of poems from Kunitz' first volume, *Intellectual Things* (1930), and poems written since then. The later poems on the whole do not seem quite so good as the early: the manner is strained and difficult, more complicated than in the early poems, apparently in response to Kunitz' personal desires. But there are a number of poems among the later ones—"Reflection by a Mailbox," "The Tutored Child," "The Daughter of the Horseleech," "No Word"—to place with such early ones as "The Words of the Preacher," "Ambergris," "He," "Vita Nuova," as among the distinguished poetry of our generation.

The poems in *A Wreath for the Sea* are often longish; they are literary in derivation and baroque in manner. One difficulty encountered is that Fitzgerald doesn't carry out and develop his images; and his favorite mannerism is a flat, oblique ending. The resultant poetry tends to be thin, minor in tone and, so far as it is explicit, in theme. If Fitzgerald could use thought more directly and entirely, he would be much better. Thus, though one reads even the best pieces with some disappointment, one puts down the book from a diligent, complete reading with a sense of having met a real poet.

*An Act of Life* contains three long poems of a sort of "public speech" and a number of lyrics. The lyrics are best and characteristic of Spencer—simplicity of statement of fairly complex themes. In the longer poems emphasis is on simplicity, too; probably the handling is a little too easy and glib. The attitudes are not new, but they are not despicable. There is considerable emphasis of the word *wise*, and if we interpret the word as meaning the wisdom of the casual liberal, we will understand Spencer's attitudes in the poems and toward their composition.

David Cornel DeJong's pamphlet contains nineteen poems. Unlike the much more important book of his poems, *Across the Board*, the collection is arranged apparently to show a chronological development of the poet. This arrangement provides the main interest of the pamphlet, which adds hardly any poems as memorable as some of the work of the book.

I have very little space left in which to comment on twelve books, although many are worthy of extended comment. Coblenz, Reece, Gessler, Welles, and Longchamps work largely within the limits of post-romanticism. Coblenz is most energetic and powerful when criticizing contemporary civilization, and a half dozen such poems in this book are quite fine; the others have great repetitiveness of theme and manner, particularly the pathetic strain upon nature. Byron Herbert Reece seems to me one of the two or three best post-romantic poets now writing, but this collection represents his work too meagerly and unevenly to be of much importance; I suspect that much of the work here is cast off from selections for a full book promised this year. Gessler is interesting only for color; he is a poor craftsman in most of the work. Winifred Welles' posthumous collection adds little to her reputation; she has a surface brilliance in a shadowy Elinor Wylie sort of way, but with less substance and character than Elinor Wylie had. The Longchamps collection is no more than promising.

The seven poets in search of an answer are Maxwell Bodenheim, Joy Davidman, Langston Hughes, Aaron Kramer, Alfred Kreymborg, Martha Millet, Norman Rosten. The poems are poems of anti-fascist wrath and anger, a very worthy and admirable theme which Joy Davidman and Aaron Kramer realize in a distinguished manner, with Hughes, Kreymborg, and Rosten a little less successful in these particular poems. *A Little Anthology of Canadian Poets* contains recent work, with E. J. Pratt, A. M. Klein, and Leo Kennedy writing the poems which make the volume worthwhile. William Everson's *Waldport Poems*, an attractively printed little pamphlet, provides interesting comments on the pathos of war, but the poems are too informal to have much value.

The remaining four books are more directly concerned with the war. Justema is best, his "Poems of an Army Year" having the character of observant notes but hardly caught as poetry. It is a topical book, better than many prose ones. William Meredith's book is a disappointing one for the Yale Series of Younger Poets. So many of the poems are schoolboy pieces, mawkish, with badly written parts. The later poems are better but not distinguished. Two are admirable, "Navy Field" for good work with an easy, casual tone, and "Reductio ad Absurdum Blues." The John Pudney book and the anthology of winners in a poetry contest among members of the Eighth Army are of interest chiefly for documentary value, not for their poems.

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