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BOOKS and COMMENT

John Dillon Husband

SOME READINGS IN RECENT POETRY

Publishers, advertisers, and the pace of our time have given us some bad habits. They have fifth-columned us into the idea that we must buy the day's newest book this morning, read it this afternoon, and comment cleverly on it tonight. That a book may have durable value is a lost notion. Try asking for Guard of Honor or Lord Weary's Castle, for Porgy or The Roan Stallion, at your bookseller's. You will probably get a cold and glassy stare, or whatever is reserved for cranks and eccentrics. A book a year old, unless it is a perennial bestseller, is dead as the gold-rush. Books have shorter and shorter lives. Immortality is close to being defined through brief resurrection as a paperback.

Neither publishers nor any one else, except writers, seem much concerned at this. It is just part of the Great Fever. I think it may partly explain the sad limbo into which poetry—or the reading of poetry—has declined. Reading poetry is properly a leisured and contemplative affair. A poem digests slowly, and it wants going back to. But the idea of going back to anything, of living with it past the hour of meeting it, is being conditioned out of us. Therefore poetry stumps us, and we shun it. It is the publisher's poor relation and the reading public's stepchild.

Fortunately it goes on being written, and some of it is well written and well read. Perhaps it goes on being written and being read because it is more basic and more healthy than the fever of our age, a little hopeful core of health.
It is remarkable that poetry is not more a coterie affair than it is. It is almost as plagued by camp followers as is the little theater movement. In a measure it suffers the penalty of that situation, but it needs only a brief look at the poetic scene to see that this aspect of our literature is healthier, hardier, and far more dedicated to its craft than is, for example, the novel. Limited as the field of verse may be, no prose galaxy burns with so steady a luminosity. How casually one can come up with a run of significant names: Auden, Spender, Shapiro, Wilbur, Roethke, Eberhart, Scott, Jarrell—the names pop up like daisies, and each of them is good. Tastes, responses, enthusiasms, may differ widely, but more than a score of poets excite healthy controversy in our time.

Well, then, is the state of poetry better than it was ten, twenty years ago? When we run an eye over the field can we find bright hopes for tomorrow? Or are we refining ourselves out of existence through channels of effete subtlety? And, finally, is poetry being pushed out the window by the ever-narrowing margin of publication channels for poetry?

There is peril in every generalization, but it seems to me that our current poets are at least sound. Not much sign of such flashing magnificence as burgeoned in Dylan Thomas, no. Nor poetic intelligences as brilliantly capable and informed as Auden's. These are phenomena that we only see when they stand full-blown in front of us. They are not predictable elements. I suppose any one of a dozen poetic figures might suddenly step over an invisible line and emerge as a brilliance. No one can safely say which ones, or when. We can say with assurance, however, that we have good poets in remarkable numbers, and with extraordinary range of vitality and individuality.

A cross section from a year or so of publication gives a fair representation of the pattern and character of our time. It allows some perspective to gather, and it gives us a span of time that lets things settle into their places, be seen at fuller length. We can see them all together—the new poets, the speculative potentials, and the stalwarts who continue and who will continue, and who give sinew to the picture.
Among the durables in such a group is Theodore Roethke, whose volume *The Waking* represents a selection from twenty years’ work. Even if Roethke were not as much a poet to be reckoned with as he is, a record of twenty years’ growth is an affair of consequence.

Roethke has been a good poet and a fine craftsman for a long time. The early poems are glass-smooth, the balances exquisitely delicate and precise, yet with no suggestion of preciousness. The lines in the early work are scrupulously disciplined, the management of technique and poetic device wears the mark of the master craftsman. Moreover, in even the early poems Roethke reaches a personal idiom, speaks with his own tongue. He sees already uniquely the elements of his experience that with increasing depth and proportion establish his later voice and his dominating view. Truly of himself he says, “I’m naked to the bone,/ With nakedness my shield./ Myself is what I wear:/ I keep the spirit bare.”

The foundation elements make themselves known early, too: his intense preoccupation with what moves close to earth, or in earth, and with what is green and growing, not prettily, no roses and dewdrops, but the matter-of-fact moving of earth’s substance into earth’s shapes. He sees the heron, for instance, not as sky creature but as swamp creature: “The heron stands in water where the swamp/ Has deepened to the blackness of a pool,/ Or balances with one leg on a hump/ Of marsh grass heaped above a muskrat hole.”

In the structure of Roethke’s vision, children, childhood, a child’s capacities for and ways of feeling—these from the beginning are important. So are the small earth creatures, and crawling things, and mosses and algae. These are the elements upon which Roethke’s poetry feeds and grows. It is in part the constancy of his preoccupation with these things and their qualities that assures his durable significance. It provides the steadfast attention within a changing perspective that is the surest access to dimension.
As Roethke moves forward in time, the perspectives and the meanings modulate and shift; the techniques, too, shift. Most remarkable in his development is the abrupt alteration in the character of his work of the present decade. The limitations of his material, the blind alley of unflawed craftsmanship, perfection in a limited orbit, were a trap into which Roethke is too astute a poet to let himself fall. When he says, "And now we are to have that pelludious Jesus-shimmer over all things," he knows his need, and knows at least what he must leave behind. "I'll make it; but it may take me,... A true mole wanders like a worm."

His departure from the rather narrow orbit of his early work, and the abrupt altering of his prosody, go hand in hand with a sharper inquisitiveness, a larger demand upon the material of his vision. If Roethke were to follow too far the experimental, exploratory idiom and manner of such recent poems as "Unfold! Unfold!" and "I Cry, Love! Love!" he might fall into too private a world. The poems in themselves are fine, however, and again I think Roethke is too aware of what he is doing to get lost along the way. It seems more probable that from these new outposts Roethke will move on to become even a better poet than he now is.

Another of the stalwarts of our interval is Richard Eberhart. Mr. Eberhart is prolific, and he proliferates widely, both at home and abroad. Undercliff, his selected poems of seven years—a briefer span than Mr. Roethke's—is a good representation of Mr. Eberhart at his quite good best, and at his not so good, which is almost always a good deal better than most of what one sees.

The essence of Mr. Eberhart's work, it seems to me, is the creation of an illusion of naïveté, or if you prefer, of flat simplicity. As Mr. Eberhart uses it, it is an illusion that demands a high level of craftsmanship and a disciplined and able mind. This is the kind of management that makes such poems as "The Tobacconist
of Eighth Street" so effective, and provides a framework for such lines as "And I went howling into the crooked streets,/ Smashed with recognition."

One of Mr. Eberhart's most notable capacities is his ability in controlling a long poem. It is peculiar to our time that the discipline and structure implicit in longer work is something most of us are not able to manage. We are good at the fifty-yard dash, but not at the mile. Mr. Eberhart is admirably good at it, and he is able to negotiate it in varied patterns. "A Legend of Viable Women," for instance, transmutes an echo of Chaucer into something of Mr. Eberhart's own, and synthesizes a sequence that with a less capable and ironic touch would be simply a catalogue or a sequence of profiles without internal interdependence. I am much taken also with "An Herb Basket," a cluster of sharp and lovely fragments rather in the manner of Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." This kind of thing, too, is no tyro's trick.

Nonetheless, in spite of these and other excellent poems, I turn from Mr. Eberhart feeling that he has not found a definitive voice for himself. Perhaps he will. The echoes that sound through these poems, echoes of Blake, of Stevens, of Lowell, Eberhart's preoccupation with God and his preoccupation with the forms of death, seem a trying on of masks. They may be gestures through which one must legitimately pass on the road to achieving a statement of one's own. It makes for a sense of something not yet finished, though, in spite of the high order of Mr. Eberhart's competencies.

IN THIS CROSS-SECTION sampling only one book length volume, Kenneth Rexroth's The Dragon and the Unicorn, really stands out. Mr. Rexroth has established himself so solidly and so extensively that one feels pretty sure, picking up a new book of his, that it will not be disappointing. I find The Dragon and the Unicorn a volume of absolute delight. Like Marcus Aurelius, it
can be read forward or backward, or from the middle out in either direction. You can read anywhere in it and be pleased, and yet it is not in the least a discursive volume, or a sequence of good fragments. It is just so good all the way through that it rewards the reader at any point.

Mr. Rexroth has learned much from William Carlos Williams, and he has made what he learned his own. The integrity of line, the delusive simplicity of manner, the apparently unpoetic media that call for the highest skill, belong to them both. *The Dragon and the Unicorn* is wholly free of the grand manner that overtakes most poets who try for any sustained comment of this sort. It eats its way through the middle zones of living, and touches us where we are. It is astringent, and it is lucid. By a really remarkable trick of shifting direction, focus, and pace at precisely the strategic moments, the volume stays on an even keel all the way. It never wallows, and it never suffers from over-development.

I suppose it might be called the collected observations and reflections of a good man and a good poet who sees with a clear eye and a fine perspective. It ought to be subject to some sort of classification. The trouble is, as with any reasonably unique volume, that the moment you classify it you have limited it. It is like that with *The Dragon and the Unicorn*. However one may catalogue it, it is a fine volume, and it ought to be on a lot of our bookshelves.

UNLESS THE MEAGER REWARDS of being a poet turn him to other pastures, Peter Viereck will probably remain one of the major figures in the poetry of our period. *The First Morning* shows him again as a poet who has range, has power, has wit. In a time when so many poets play nice tunes on small spinets, the presence of the dimension we find here is gratifying: His poetry as a whole has an internal structure and cohesiveness, it is all of a piece. He can be flip, he can be savagely satirical, he can be mellow and he can be kind. And he can use a pun with wicked effect, as in his thrust at Empson and Brooks, commenting on the obses-
sion with obscurity and ambiguity: "And only we still dare to hate it/ Because a texte without a Muse in/ Is but a snore and an allusion."

Viereck is refreshing in another respect. Unashamedly and with candor he refutes the languors and death-wishes of our day. It is fitting that he should say in the Phi Beta Kappa poem, "Around the curve where all of me that fountained/ Leans over, stretches out and is a stream,/ And loiters back the long, the round-about,/ The sweet, the earth-way back to sea again—/ At just that curve I woke."

In all his roles, Viereck is intensely in love with life. The sap runs fast in him, and he likes it. His positivism, moreover, has more truth, more validity, than the more conventional melancholy droop that perseveres in the descendents of the aging eagle. As if to assert that validity, Viereck splendidly pin-points the false cliches of the nature boys in a few fast lines on Joyce Kilmer's most universalized triteness. "I'll bow my trunk to true simplicity,/ But not to folksy simperings that drool. Poems are made by trees like me,/ But only God can make a fool."

For me, one of the most delightful gambits in The First Morning—not overlooking "Kilroy Revisited"—is the opening poem, "Stanzas in Love with Life and August." Its delight is partly in the sheer "go" of the poem, and in the zest with which it gambols. But beyond that, Mr. Viereck has made audacious and extravagant use of book and page format to support and give effect to the impact of the poem's progress. In a lesser poet, and with less awareness of the values of page space, emphasis, and separation, this manipulation of blank territory would be a tawdry gaucherie. Mr. Viereck brings it off, because he knows how it should be used, and with what judicious sense of balance.

ONE OF THE MOST HOPEFULLY exciting aspects of recent publication in poetry has been the publishing of a series of verse volumes by the University of Indiana Press. It is exciting because it suggests a hope for a publication channel for poetry similar to
that which is accorded to works of scholarship. Major university presses, in the main, have shied away from the publication of poetry. There seem to be two reasons for this. One is that the university presses are dedicated almost wholly to the publication of scholarly manuscripts which otherwise would have no outlets at all, and that poetry is, happily, not a venture in scholarship. The second reason seems to be a rather panicky feeling that the sort of subsidizing involved in the publication of poetry might require a kind of value judgment that university press editors usually feel to be outside their proper scope. Both attitudes seem to me unfortunate. Of course, new writing is an intruder in any domain of scholarship, and there is a good deal of looking down noses at it in university circles. Nonetheless the university presses have an opportunity here, at least where poetry is concerned. Such a broadening out of university publication might bring to the universities themselves a more realistic awareness of contemporary value judgments than usually prevails among them. In time it might mitigate that persistent arrogant seclusion which maintains that the only literature that has validity and is properly the material of the scholar's attention is—with such dubious and hesitant exceptions as Faulkner and Joyce—that which has cooked like English cabbage for a long enough time to have acquired the venerable and hopelessly respectable flavor of age.

The volumes which the Indiana University Press has given us, under Mr. Yellen's direction, are nicely gotten up. The venture has none of the rather desperate poor-relation aspect of some of the smaller presses. One only wishes, though, that the selection was as effective as the presentation. None of the volumes I have seen has been really bad, but neither has any one of them thus far been more than very conventionally competent. In the case of David Wagoner, one can accept this, recognizing that Mr. Wagoner is a very young poet, and within the implied limits of that a capable craftsman. So far as the recognition and publication of new poets go, this is all to the good. But the excuse holds only in the one instance. At least where more experienced hands
are represented, one would hope that the selection would be better than it is. The most recent volume I have seen, Padraic Colum's *The Vegetable Kingdom*, is a case in point. This tedious eulogizing in the inevitable Irish manner of dahlias and geraniums and lilacs and woodbine and roses and quinces and tiger lilies does nothing more than give recognition to a name that should give us a better book. It is tea-room poetics with a vengeance, and it is lamentable choosing for a press embarking on such a venture as Indiana University's has accepted. One hopes that later volumes may give more fulfillment to the promise of the gesture.

**The Most Courageous** of the on-going smaller presses, I believe, is the Swallow Press, and no comment on presses would be complete without some reference to it. Mr. Swallow does a creditable job of presenting his new poets. The half-dozen annual small volumes of the New Poetry Series are chosen with discrimination and good taste, and with an eye for talent. The most distinctive of the recent volumes from the Swallow Press, I think, are Harvey Shapiro's *The Eye*, and Carl Bode's *The Sacred Seasons*. Mr. Shapiro's poetry takes life from a special, acrid intensity and a scrupulously controlled manner overlaid upon the intensity of his feeling. His war poems, particularly, bite with a fine harsh irony. Mr. Bode ploughs a much more conventional field. He has an obvious penchant for the sonnet in its traditional guise, and whether in the sonnet or in other form, he is a manifest traditionalist. There is nothing wrong with that, however, except as it may be used as excuse for bad work. Mr. Bode accepts his tradition for what it is, with its advantages and its disadvantages, and he works comfortably and well within it. Sometimes, as in "Film Epic," he transmutes the best of the past into a fine illumination of the living moment.

Among the new poets, I find substantial pleasure in Ernest Kroll's* first book, *Cape Horn and Other Poems*, which

* See Poet Signature 1, Summer 1949 NMQ, pp. 207-213.—Ed.
bears returning to and grows with acquaintance. I suppose it is Mr. Kroll's way of seeing that so impresses. He sees as a child does—a different kind of child than Mr. Roethke's—wholly and ingenuously, but he communicates the feeling engendered by that seeing with a fine mature competence and precision. He ranges widely, and although he is not always distinguished, his command is sure at all points. "New England: A Vision," for example, is as spare and bony in its lines as the landscape it gives us, towered by the mill, "... standing in the silence, hoarding mystery,/Like the Acropolis upon a local hill,/The broken temple of a barren mill,/The landscape bare of all save history."

Another first volume is Dorothy Hughes' slim selection, The Green Loving. Miss Hughes is not a new nor a young poet, so this volume represents the careful gleaning of a good many years' work. The result is quietly fine. There is so much half-baked poetry from young poets who publish too soon, under the impetus of a vanity press or a doting sponsor or a sick fever to get into print, that it gives a special kind of pleasure to find a volume like The Green Loving, whose poems move so unpretentiously through their excellences.

Edwin Muir has been a man of letters so long and so variously that his Collected Poems, covering the years 1921-1951, is its own kind of special event. It is a long look backward that Mr. Muir takes, and it ought to be a satisfying one. In one of his latest poems he says, "One foot in Eden still, I stand/ And look across the other land." That is perhaps more literally true now for Mr. Muir than it was in the beginning, but in a sense he has always been doing that. Reading these poems one is most struck by their uniformity—that is, by how little difference there is between the early and the late work. With most writers, either in verse or in prose, this would constitute a lamentable deficiency, a lack of growth. In Mr. Muir's case it is something else. His poetic world has always been a contemplative one, an archetypal
world, if you like, and a little apart from the flux of event and circumstance. Perhaps it was the stringencies of his personal world that gave him such repose and tranquillity in his contemplative verse. It is the more to his credit if that is so. This is traditional verse, but it is honest, it is generous and tender, and in these qualities it is as gently refreshing as a re-reading of Stevenson's essays. "Light and praise,/ Love and atonement, harmony and peace,/ Touch me, assail me; break and make my heart." That is the keystone of Mr. Muir's recognition, and of his achievement.

Another volume to the credit of the Grove Press is Jean Garrigue's *The Monument Rose*. Miss Garrigue's poetry seems to wrestle with some vehement compulsion, and this sense of struggle which infuses the work, when it is successfully controlled, gives us poetry of sufficient force to make us look forward hopefully to what she may later accomplish. She is at this stage a little like the pony about which she comments: "The little pony stands upon his pride/ As do we all, as do we all./ With coiling mane and glittering hide/ He stumbles from the earthworm stall/ His pride and vehemence his all." For Miss Garrigue that is not quite all. There is also the poetic skill which sometimes reflects Mr. Ransom and sometimes Miss Garrigue, and there is a conscious seeking toward something which she has not yet wholly found.

Such a looking-over of the field brings the reviewer its pleasures, its irritations, and its lamentations. It seems to me too bad, for example, that so good a poet as Christopher Logue should come to us in the limited availability of a Paris edition. I am speaking now of his *Wand and Quadrant*, an eminently more competent volume than so many of the puttings-forth from American presses. I would wish, too, that some of the good English poets and printings might be more available to us than they are. And I wish that the rich natural voice of the Negro could be
heard in its own right rather than in such weakly imitative volumes as Claude McKay's Selected Poems or M. B. Tolson's much too pretentious Libretto for the Republic of Liberia. I find myself also wishing that some happy clairvoyance might come to those little presses which try to compensate for very bad poetry by nice sky blue and flesh pink paper, an indulgence in fanciful typography, and a fondness for bindings in flamboyant gold and stardust.

On the whole, though, a sampling of the year's poetry is a good deal more satisfying and much less foggly depressive than a similar prowling through the year's prose. In spite of the difficulties that beset the poet, poetry goes on, it seems to me, as a green and flourishing plant. It has a very substantial number of practitioners who are both earnest and able, and if we are not in the midst of a fine poetic renaissance, neither are we suffering a general debility. What most strikes me is the number of very good poets who are seriously dedicated to a fine craft. That makes the ground out of which great poets grow.

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