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an appreciation
of a neglected poet
—Eli Siegel

WALTER LEUBA

Whole in Brightness

A poet who writes for men and women on subjects close to them and full of meaning for them, in a language they can understand, and who does this naturally, with virtuosity but without condescension, is not readily found. Yet at anytime since 1925 readers of English have had such a poet among them, a poet with an intensity of simple purpose so obvious and clear that it could fail of being welcomed only by not being wanted. Through a great poem in 1925 he came to the attention of a wide newspaper and magazine public, to be joked about, scorned, and parodied into immediate obscurity, except for some few remembered but remote and solitary welcomes. There was indeed what he calls "the lantern of approval on the desolate, forbidding shore." Beyond this, the record of the overnight fame of a before unknown young man from Baltimore, Eli Siegel, born at Dvinsk in Russia August 16, 1902, has been kept unexplored in minds and libraries.

A poet such as Siegel would seem to have been desirable any time these past four hundred years and inevitable in the present century. Poets of noble intention, of fancy, of learning and culture, of affable formality, and of discreet superiority are before the public and read by the critics and university wits, and by those with a stomach for refined and thoughtful diversion. The poet of swift and simple sincerity was laughed out of the headlines over thirty years ago and left unpublished until only the other day.

Eli Siegel's once notorious poem began:

*Quiet and green was the grass of the field.
The sky was whole in brightness,*

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and the patrons of our literature, with knowledge, culture, refinement, sensibility, and experience, saw nothing in the words beyond a stimulation to anger, sarcasm, or hilarity. Later Siegel wrote many other poems—I have no idea how many, though the ones given in the present book * are a sufficient sample—in which, whatever else he did, he never once betrayed a false attitude. Alive in a burning honesty and directness, he had none to betray.

What Siegel has to say is precisely what every artist tries to say in his own idiom. Here it is in one of its forms, an INDOOR SCENE AT NEAR 7 P.M.

Candle red is different from
Catsup red, and catsup red
Is different from little-cushion
Red.
Moreover, little-cushion red
Is the only red,
On which Shakey, a pussycat,
Is now lying.

It would be superfluous to attempt to describe it. The difficulty is not, however, in what he says, which is at times extraordinarily complex and delicate, but in how he says it, which is simplicity all the way, simple subjects, simple words, simply syntax, simplicity piled on simplicity, and we know that a very little of this quality is enough. Writers and readers of modern high-class books have other preferences. It is other than simple that we wish to be. The modern mind is complex, and we have science and machinery and emotional disturbances and statistics and discriminations in taste perpetually with us. "I guess you know I use words very carefully," Siegel wrote in 1931; "I look upon them as explosive, possibly ruinous jewels." That care, conscious, curious, alive with conscience, is in the lines:

Consider, friends, the impermanence of obstruction,
The friendliness and everlastingness of possibility,
And such matters:
And you will alter a little
The irritation of long ago,

* *Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana: Poems*, by Eli Siegel, with a letter by William Carlos Williams. New York: Definition Press. 1957.

Question its authenticity,
 And use the past
 To be refreshed,
 As it was meant to be —
 Used now.

These words are not poured from an empty jug.

Siegel writes the common tongue, freed of its fraud and self-delusion; and he writes of common things all pretty much well-known, like daisies and subways, telephones and turtles, and of common events, love, death, punishment, change, and permanence. What happens to his triad of the ordinary—words, things, and events, is that in each separate poem associations are made in well-defined and emotionally appropriate rhythms, associations which are both momentary and lasting, real and new, associations that can stimulate even the unschooled man's sense of history, of the past, of transience, and of his immediate earth. Through successions of these associations, often of opposites in time, space, and thought, in an almost new-born plain-speaking, run (they can be found by looking for them) almost all of the wonderful arrangements of sounds and syllables by means of which words become the servants of clear intelligence and ardent emotion:

Desire is innumerable,
 Like the pigeons in a continent
 Or foam entities in universal waters.
 If all the spears that warriors carried marching east and west
 (Any time) were topped each with a red and white desire, desire being
 red and white,
 More spears would be needed to accommodate the waiting desires.
 If every desire had its sister leaf
 Going with it in its whirl, march and progress through Dear Time,
 Some desires would have no sister leaves.
 All this as light on the Question of the immanence and number of
 desire,
 Serves and can.
 A multitude of generals accompanied by drums,
 A flood of diamonds issued from a planet,
 And a forest-ful of tigers, each with a touch of red,
 Are, together, the guard of desire in mornings.

In the same year in which he wrote *Encomium of Desire*, from which the above lines are taken, he said in a letter: "I still write poems; they fiercely develop. They are abstract and daring." The language remains our familiar one, now rarely used by poets. It is untouched or only slightly touched by literary self-consciousness and the conventions of expression, but it can be found in many places, in places where Siegel himself certainly found it, in the Bible, in Goldsmith, in Whitman, in Thackeray, in the ballad writers, in Shakespeare, in both prose and poetry throughout literature:

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?
They are alive and well somewhere.—WHITMAN.

The world was going to its business again, although dukes lay dead and ladies mourned for them; and kings, very likely, lost their chances.—THACKERAY.

The joyful and the sorrowful are there; men are dying there, men are being born; men are praying, —on the other side of a brick partition, men are cursing; and around them all is the vast, void Night.—CARLYLE.

The womb shall forget him; the worm shall feed sweetly on him.—JOB.

The qualities of this language are natural, continuous, and conscious in Siegel. Other writers have happened upon these effects: to Siegel this is the only speech. He is at every step the poet and his directness and mastery of technical devices allow him frequent perfections. He is not mannered and he does not write for effect. Everything he writes is emotionally honest and therefore of interest. His qualities have their occasional defects; the directness is sometimes bald and colorless, the honesty sometimes simply honest. Yet he is, as Williams says, "supremely gifted" and "undamaged by the past," and for what he has to say and the unadorned idiom in which he says it, the number of consummate poems and passages is extraordinary. Everywhere there is an exquisite emotional tact:

*Find the lost lines in
The writing that is your child, mothers. . . .*

Many of the comments and letters stimulated by *The Nation* prize poem of 1925 asserted or implied that Siegel was a semi-literate. Yet there were few critics at the time as widely and as well read as the object

of their scorn. Siegel was an omnivorous reader with an exact and comprehensive knowledge of books, but he was neither bookish nor literary. The present volume includes an amusing tribute to George Saintsbury. It is instructive to compare Siegel's use in this poem of the image of a hen scratching with Edmund Wilson's "like eating peanuts" essay on Saintsbury. The poet is the critic.

To the reader of 1925 Siegel seemed flat, commonplace, silly, or dull. It was obvious that he scarcely touched the contemporary and popular fashion of literary allusion and what we understood to be metaphysical wit. Yet no poet was and is more metaphysical and his allusions are almost constant; but they are usually allusions to objects, experience, the world about us, and they are allusions that almost anyone can understand. They are allusions that waken the meanings of common objects of thought and experience, that make the commonplace world magical. They contain little food for research:

One has Delia seen

In the thistle's lightest stir, lightest belonging,

*In the thinnest ripple lonely pond has in an 8 o'clock orange offering
of sky.*

She is with the soft, hardly noticed puff

Of air, in summer stillness some hours after morning.

She it is who is between one when one hasn't sinned

*And when one has. She is with the furthest colored rays of the sun
when setting*

And the last horizon's point.

She has taken for herself substance at its finest,

Least tinkling. So Delia walks the air.

To the mind conscious of the meanings of associations and of the relationships of objects and feelings, these poems are deeply and clearly metaphysical. Siegel, though a plain objective poet in one sense, offering no problem of interpretation at all, is a metaphysical poet through and through, and the metaphysic can be sensed and felt even by persons having no interest in the matter. He has, however, little resemblance to the poets of the seventeenth century who are called metaphysical. Though he shares their curiosity of mind and their appetite for the implications of things, he has none of their isolation, determined subtlety, and pertinacious struggle with fixed, unpliant matter. Nor is he ever arbitrary, strained, particularly learned, or exhibitionistic with

his material. He travels only into the common darknesses, where he sheds uncommon light.

He has few conceits and almost no decoration. Green grass is enough: it never becomes of itself anything so magnificently fanciful as the handkerchief of the Lord. But while, in Whitman, the handkerchief of the Lord is by itself, alone, sufficient as an image, in Siegel the grass or the green grass or the quiet grass is always in the company of other equally direct and well-known, though unexpected, manifestations of the spirit of earth; and in these companionships, either by momentary association or by symmetry or by contrast, meaning is related to meaning until definition is out of the question and we have the metaphysical.

There are more ways than one of getting deep. It can be done by digging, but also by opening windows, by knocking down walls, and by leaving the door ajar; and perhaps best of all by putting together things that like to be or ought to be so, and permitting the depth to come more from the nature of the world than from the wit of the writer. Men are alike in their billions, one little deeper or shallower than another, but the earth itself is profound, has no bottom, is deep beyond the most assiduous, well-paid-for excavation, beyond the sharpest sight and the clearest reasoning. Every man knows this and he either loves or fears it. "My poetry is colored and heated metaphysic to me," Siegel wrote in 1931. "It can be anything else to anybody else."

It is characteristic of simplicity that it cannot be studied and mastered. It is an integrity of mind that is, at best, preserved in sufficient purity to allow of its habitual projection in thought and word. And it makes possible the profoundest humor.

Though he does not write often of humorous matters or with general humorous intent, Siegel has a remarkable humor of his own, a quality absent from most serious writing. His humor is clean, precise, gentle, and intended; it is not an accident to simplicity but its core; it is never wiseacre. It is difficult to fix or define since it underlies his essential seriousness and artfulness and gives them impact. In reading his lines the effects shift, and though the humor does not disappear from the places where it has been found, it modulates in harmony with the varying impressions the passages make at different times, and with the intensity and color of the subject on different occasions. He calls his humor *jesting*, which it is, for it almost always appears as simple fun with ideas and objects, a lifting of the seriousness so that even the darkest thought may smile for a moment. In a letter of 1931 he wrote that "jests are made good by their hushed, ardent background." The

whole of *Familiar Mad Heroine* is such a background against which jests are made good. In a poem omitted from the present volume, the details "Ethel, with white, white teeth; Ethel who has heard of Tennyson," who had read many books "and, a little, Elinor Glyn and Robert Browning" are such jests; and so are "God roundly condemned" in *Encomium of Desire* and hundreds of others. One of the best is in *Ralph Isham, 1753 and Later*, where one is told of the eighteenth century man-about-town's reading of Addison and Pope, of his quoting of Thomson and Young. Later this is quietly pointed and defined in the lines:

Pope is studied in Kansas;
 Thomson is studied in Kansas;
 The name of Young is heard in Topeka;
 And the name of Ralph Isham, who loved Pope, who loved Thomson,
 who knew Young, is not heard in Topeka.

The knew Young is a fine stroke, with historical, critical, and poetic insight in one multi-colored flash. If the presence of Topeka is not enjoyed, a lot of Siegel must remain unenjoyed. It is an old device. Topeka comes into this magnificent biography exactly as Rappahannoc does in a great passage in *Henry Esmond*, though the one is jest, the other melancholy.

This is a book of staunch, assured poems. A reading of the book will persuade and much of the book will remain in the mind and imagination. The reader will find a combination of the elegiac, humor, brightness, and critical appraisal in the just quoted biography of Ralph Isham. He will find the sheer subtlety of *The Unbrought Me*; the delicacy and depth of *Little Zeno*; the lovely and lonely simplicity of poems like *Smoke Goes up Slowly*, *Dear Birds, Tell This to Mothers*, and *Meant to Be*; the jesting comical depths of *Partly, Baskets—Their Due*, *Let Fat Men in Plush Coats Do as They Please a Little*, and *The Proud Turtle*; and finally the great slices of the earth's own poem: the title poem—*Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana*, *The Lord Has Stolen Her Whims*, *Encomium of Desire*, and *The World of the Unwashed Dish*.

The major part of this essay was written twenty years ago. In 1926 the name of Eli Siegel was a momentous one to me, and after thirty years of having many of his poems effortlessly and accurately housed in my head, the wonder of his work is greater than ever.