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A REVIEW OF SOME CURRENT POETRY

- Poems 1937-1942*, by David Gascoyne. London: Nicholson and Watson, 1943. 8s.6d.
Cloth of the Tempest, by Kenneth Patchen. New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1943. \$2.75.
The Illuminations, by Arthur Rimbaud; translated by Helen Rootham. Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, The Poets of the Year, 1944. \$.50.
The Last Man, by Weldon Kees. San Francisco: The Colt Press, 1943. \$1.50.
The Stone Ants, by Hubert Creekmore. Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1943. \$2.00.
Coronal, by Paul Claudel; translated by Sister Mary David, S.S.N.D. New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1943. \$2.75.
Statement, by Don Gordon. Boston: Bruce Humphries, Inc., 1943. \$2.00.
From Invisible Mountains, by Mary Sinton Leitch. New York: The Fine Editions Press, 1943. \$2.00.
Louder Than the Drum, by Gerard Previn Meyer. New York: League to Support Poetry, 1943. \$1.50.
Delay Is the Song, by Rosamond Haas. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1944. \$2.00.
The Vigil of Venus: Pervigilium Veneris, the Latin text with an introduction and English translation by Allen Tate. Cummington, Massachusetts: The Cummington Press, 1943. \$2.50 and \$5.00.
Cain, by Anne Ridler. London: Nicholson and Watson, 1943. 4s.6d.
Rainer Maria Rilke: Fifty Selected Poems with English Translations, by C. F. MacIntyre. Second Edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941. \$2.00.
Trial by Time, by Thomas Hornsby Ferril. New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1944. \$2.00.
At the Long Sault and Other New Poems, by Archibald Lampman; foreword by Duncan Campbell Scott; introduction by E. K. Brown. Boston and Toronto: Bruce Humphries, Inc., and the Ryerson Press, Inc., 1943. \$2.50.
Time of Year, by Samuel French Morse; introduction by Wallace Stevens. Cummington, Massachusetts: The Cummington Press, 1943. \$2.75.
Sufficient Wisdom, with Other Poems, by Arthur MacGillivray, S.J. Boston: Bruce Humphries, Inc., 1943. \$2.00.

To give even a summary critical comment on seventeen books within such a short space is an overwhelming task. I shall have to be content principally with saying "I like this" or "I don't care much for that." However, I am dividing the

books into three groups, so that comments may as much as possible, although generally and broadly, apply to all books in a group. And I shall borrow two of John Crowe Ransom's terms which are gaining some currency: "structure" and "texture."

The first group of five books is "modern" in the sense of a fundamental dependence upon a technique of association. According to Mr. Ransom's scheme, I suppose these poems would be said to have very little "structure," since it is difficult and often impossible to distill from them any little prose argument or essay. The interest of the poems is largely one of "texture," of a complicated welter of imagery and feeling tied together, if at all, by a thread of association between images and feelings. Mr. Gascoyne offers the best book of the five, and for a poet who is so frequently fine one detects an inadequacy in the above general remarks. In his best poems, there is a structure—more of strategy in the background than of any prose argument threading the work—which philosophically, I suppose, goes back through the Symbolists to Poe's notion that a poem is affective in organization, its purpose being to create in the reader a certain mood or feeling. Here is an illustrative, and it seems to me very capable, passage from Mr. Gascoyne's "To a Contemporary":

You screwed your heart up to incredible
Rigidity; upon your sleeve it glittered like
A jewelled watch tick-tocking. All your wits
Were tough as wire since you, cut to the quick
By premature cold disabuse,
Had set your face against your inmost face
(Which wept, but which no tears could slake).

The philosophical position behind this sort of poetry leads to minor virtues, and is represented at its best by Mr. Gascoyne and by one of the masters of the mode, Arthur Rimbaud, who is included in the Poets of the Year series with a very good edition, including both the original French and an English translation, of some of his prose poems. The inadequacy of the mode for more ambitious work is shown in Kenneth Patchen. Of his three latest books, *Cloth of the Tempest* seems to me the poorest, probably because it is hardly more than repetition of the same thing; the small *Teeth of the Lion* is the best in that it shows his evident virtues without so much tiresome repetition. One wishes that his symbols would "jell" so that he could get on with his work. In the meantime, the new thing to be noted is that the startling young man of letters is here taken up by a large commercial publisher. Weldon Kees does not belong exactly in this group, but his first collection of poems displays such a variety of methods that it fits better here than in either of the other two arbitrary groups I have made for the purposes of this review. A number of his poems are admirable, and one still remembers the impression of them in magazine publication. Collected, the impression tends to blur somewhat, since the group effect is one of experimentation, lack of basic direction, and interesting and good talent not yet achieving purpose. About Hubert Creekmore's work I can say little; my reading so far leads to indifference.

From one extreme, one may presume an opposite extreme: in this case a poetry depending mostly upon "structure" and very little upon "texture," a poetry with a ready prose argument but with little complication of statement. Surely there is no virtue in complication alone, but the extreme is a poetry in which the "structure"

or argument seems pat, lacking the intellectual and emotional energy of considered communication. Such, I feel, characterizes the next five books on the list. I hesitate to place Paul Claudel's book in this group, since I cannot arrive at a final judgment of the work within my own mind. Both the French and English texts are presented; my knowledge of French is sufficient to demonstrate that the English version is faulty, but not sufficient to grasp the original. But the verse is diffuse and allusive, the religious feeling spread pretty thin, the intellect too baldly conclusive for one who must approach the work through some lack of interest in what is attempted.

Of the books in this group, I like best Don Gordon's *Statement*. The generalizations for the group apply to much of the work in the book, but a number of the poems, mostly in the sections on social themes, are among the most successful poems of the kind which I know. At this reading I admire most of the poem entitled "Unemployed," and I consider it one of the finest poems of social protest I have read. Mary Sinton Leitch is at her best in a sort of declamatory sonnet, attempting Milton's use of the oratorical style. The sonnets are often interesting, but too frequently they have a hollow ring. Mr. Meyer's *Louder Than the Drum* is the poorest volume published so far by The League to Support Poetry; he is at his best in six translations, four of them from Rimbaud. Rosamond Haas won an Avery Hopwood poetry award, but she does not maintain the quality of former winners.

Between the two extremes, presumably, lies a happy medium in which the "structure" and "texture" somehow interlace in an admirable fashion. Here the critical terminology seems to me to lose much of its value; helpful and interesting in the analysis of some extreme methods in poetry and in the exegesis of individual poems, the terms hardly seem to provide a program for analysis of this middle position. What is an advisable blending of "structure" and "texture"? Undoubtedly there are many good answers. At any rate, I have grouped the remaining seven books as those which do not willfully, at least, sacrifice one or the other.

Two volumes are translations. Allen Tate has created a very fine and beautiful English poem in translating *The Vigil of Venus*; it is an addition to the body of great poetry in English. The Cummington Press has done the book in a truly fine press manner, making all in all a book much to be prized. C. F. MacIntyre's Rilke is frankly personal, for the translations are limited to what MacIntyre calls Rilke's "small concert and salon pieces, sonatas in miniature." The translations make some good English poems, for which we are thankful; but we need not limit our interest in Rilke to MacIntyre's interest in him.

Anne Ridler's two-act play, *Cain*, is very fine, the best product I know of the recent renewal of interest in the verse drama. The play has deep penetration thematically and incidentally, borrowing some of the dash and verse ability of the later Elizabethans. As a sample, I quote from a Cain soliloquy delivered immediately after the murder of Abel:

Fallen. Fallen. Irrevocable. O child
To have murdered you! Yet now a deep peace
Is like water on my heart: the earth and sky are grey,
No sun, but no darkness: no choice, no severance,
No nightmare, but a death. He will have no movement,

Nor wish for warmth. Poor body,
 I felled you. Come, I shall learn to live,
 I shall be able to bear it; better without the lightnings
 That seared my threads, and thunder; this twilight easier
 To breathe in.

In *Trial by Time* Thomas Hornsby Ferril makes no remarkable change from the work of his second volume, *Westering*; but he further documents his position as the leading poet of his immediate region, the Rocky Mountain area. *Trial by Time* is a miscellaneous volume; in it are a number of pieces which seem stale for Ferril; but most of the longer poems—"The Prairie Melts," "Inner Song While Watching a Square Dance," "Paper Boy," "Words for Leadville," "The Grandsons," "Harper's Ferry Floating Away," "This Lake Is Mine"—and several of the shorter poems are fine. I am disturbed that a portion of the introductory essay and a few of the poems which have to be whipped along to a patriotic close will be used as ammunition in the current campaign of the over-zealous against modern poetry and of the uncritical against the so-called "new criticism." Actually, the introduction has some valuable suggestions for the schools on how to teach poetry. At his best Ferril displays the same general practice as other "moderns," including much indirection and complication, some private symbolism about the West, dependence upon concreteness of image and metaphor, and, like most modern poets, probably a too-great distrust of the abstraction and an over-qualification of the abstract word. At this writing the book is newly out and I have not seen a review of it, but I shall much miss my guess if Ferril is not trumped up by the big popular reviews and thrown in the faces of poets who are his next of kin, not his enemies.

At the Long Sault contains poems culled from Archibald Lampman's notebooks. To us it must seem marred by the poetic diction and the late romantic methods of the 1890's, from which Lampman did not escape; yet the work is still readable, even after nearly fifty years, and some of it deserves a permanent but minor place in Canadian poetry. The first collections by Samuel French Morse and Arthur MacGillivray have much to recommend them. Morse's work is more closely associated with contemporary practices; it is, however, quiet and mild, pleasing; the poem "To Ascend the Mountain," the longest poem in the book, is especially successful. MacGillivray's work is quite different, uneven to an extreme, but with a number of fine efforts in the brief "lyric" manner one doesn't come upon very frequently these days. Morse appears a mature poet; MacGillivray by chance, successful; both show a good beginning.

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