

1945

A Review of Some Current Poetry

Alan Swallow

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Swallow, Alan. "A Review of Some Current Poetry." *New Mexico Quarterly* 15, 2 (1945). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol15/iss2/34>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

But mouth remarkable for laughter wakens.
 Buddha meditates against the wild figtree
 Socrates repledges us with acrid dram
 The Passion hangs his hood of pity
 And shows the far face of man.

S. RAIZISS

A REVIEW OF SOME CURRENT POETRY

- The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden.* New York: Random House, 1945. \$3.75.
A Masque of Reason, by Robert Frost. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1945. \$2.00.
A World within a War: Poems, by Herbert Read. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945. \$2.00.
To Marry Strangers: a Book of Poems, by Winfield Townley Scott. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1945. \$2.00.
Only the Years: Selected Poems: 1938-1944, by Ruth Lechlitner. Prairie City, Illinois: The Press of James A. Decker, 1944. \$2.00.
Poetry London X, ed. by Tambimuttu. London: Editions Poetry London, Nicholson and Watson, 1944. 15s.
Poems for a Son with Wings, by Robert P. Tristram Coffin. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1945. \$1.75.
American Citizen Naturalized in Leadville, Colorado: a Poem, by Kay Boyle. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944. \$.50.
Crag and Sand, by Irene Bruce. Reno, Nevada: Reno Poetry Workshop, 1945. \$1.00.
Eclogues in Blue, by Richard Lyons. Centerville, Ohio: The Merrykit Press, 1945. No price indicated.
Anti-Climax and Other Poems, by Michael Gar. New York: New Era, 1944. No price indicated.
Generation of Journey, by Jacob Sloan. Waldport, Oregon: The Untide Press, 1945. No price indicated.
Five Poems, by Margaret Grote. Carmel, California: The Pine Cone Press, 1945. No price indicated.

W. H. Auden's career has been newsworthy. He shot into public esteem about fifteen years ago when he was quite young; he "led" the most talked-about group of poets during the decade of the thirties; and now he seems to be groping his way toward a new maturity. Already it is being said that Auden was the typical and leading poet of the thirties, but that the poet of the forties is clearly not Auden.

Publication of his *Collected Poetry* gives us a chance to look over Auden's entire poetic career to date. The first remarkable thing about Auden's poetry is that, despite its dependence at times upon all sorts of predecessors, it has a voice of its own. This is a real achievement attained by few contemporary poets. Next, it is true that Auden shows great facility. Recently in a review of one of Auden's long poems Malcolm Cowley contented himself with enumerating all the verse forms Auden used in the poem, a large number indeed. This is silly criticism, for writing verse in practically every known pattern is an exercise and hardly

proves a poet's ability. Yet there is an admirable aspect of the fact that Auden has been more willing than probably any other contemporary poet to try his hand at anything which seemed worth while; and it is even more to Auden's credit that he has tried all these manners with at least fair judgment and ability. Finally, Auden has worked consistently in a down-to-earth idiom, and at least in his earlier poems he wrote with quality in a language more broadly recognized than that of most recent poets.

But all these comments are very general. Specifically, Auden's achievement is less than these comments would suggest. So far he has written probably no more than a half dozen short poems of really fine quality. His longer poems, I think, are a more interesting achievement: Auden's method is extensive and inclined to wordiness, the longer poem provides more room for displaying the general abilities mentioned above, and the faults are more easily overlooked. I doubt if these longer poems will live half so long as the handful of fine lyrics, but from our immediate viewpoint they are fruitful in a number of ways.

Auden's faults are found in practically every one of his poems. Essentially, I suppose, they are faults of self-deception. Although he tries almost all forms and manners, his ear is pedestrian—the ear of free verse, a little poorer than that of John Skelton, whom Auden often wanted to imitate, and certainly a good way from the ear of a Shakespeare, a Milton, or a Donne. Much of Auden's facility is pyrotechnics, a delight in exciting but nearly meaningless juxtaposition of images and ideas, a symbolism which has little faith or belief behind it, a heavy dependence upon the adjective. Basically, one occasionally finds a couple of lines as fine as are written by anyone today, followed by ten which vary from anti-climax to shoddiness. The fault is thus one of intelligence, judgment, choice. When they operate at their best and the pyrotechnics is cut down, as in the last part of the poem to Yeats, in "Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle," in "Epitaph on a Tyrant," or in the nineteenth song, to mention some different types, Auden is with our best. But the moments are more rare than we might expect.

These paragraphs on Auden, whose book demands consideration as extensive as any magazine can give it, leave little space for the remaining books on the list. Robert Frost is always plenty worth while. *A Masque of Reason* is a fine anniversary publication, for Frost's seventieth birthday. The masque is, I take it, mainly a joke; it is fun in Frost's best joking manner, and the seriousness in it is sound enough to give it bite.

Herbert Read has become the godfather of a whole generation, apparently, of English poets. His critical leadership, fortunately, is better than the example of his verse, which is largely built upon the proposition that if one follows a passage of rhetoric with a passage of imagism one comes up with a poem. In the opening long ode, within a few lines of each other, we find these lines:

And so we drifted twenty years
down the stream of time
feeling that such a storm
could not break again.

Disembodied voices drift past behind the hedge
the vespers of the blackbird and the thrush
rise and die. A golden frog
leaps out of the grasses.

And he ends "To a Conscript of 1940" with the following:

Then I turned with a smile, and he answered my salute
As he stood against the fretted hedge, which was like white lace.

Winfield Townley Scott and Ruth Lechlitner have both published in more recent literary magazines, and at least a portion of their work is rather widely known. Both are concerned with contemporary and social themes, Scott with more traditional manner and Lechlitner with more experimental; and both suffer from laxness in composition, even dullness in book quantity. Lechlitner's high spots are mostly matters of good lines, whereas Scott occasionally is at his best throughout an entire poem, as in the last one in *To Marry Strangers*.

The tenth issue of *Poetry London*, combination book-periodical, is the first I have seen. It is probably the poorest in quality in that the editor has used poems from only the youngest and unpublished poets. One is not particularly impressed by any other than promising talents among the several dozen poets represented, even by Alison Boodson and Joan Snelling, the two singled out for comment in the preface. However, the project is interesting and admirable, for its poetry is only a part of its interest and ordinarily has better resources than those of this issue.

Robert P. Tristram Coffin is becoming more and more journalistic. This time we move from the send-off for his aviator son, "You do not cry, for you are brave, / Your father has a world to save," to sentimental poems of childhood "The small boy filled the dusty train, / A dozen men were boys again." I wonder if Coffin has thought of syndicating these poems in the chain newspapers they would make a great deal of money.

The remaining items are pamphlets. Kay Boyle's war poem is a topical book, a sort of allegory of racial flight. Its quality is poor, certainly not worthy of Kay Boyle. The first collection of Irene Bruce is interesting, both as a well documented case study of a good talent starting to write poetry today, and for a number of poems of quality. In his very limited edition of *Eclogues in Blue* Richard Lyons writes with ability and self-consciousness, but I don't think he has hit his stride. Michael Gar and Jacob Sloan (the latter with a finely printed pamphlet well decorated) write little more than notes for poems; integration is not evident in the work. Margaret Grote publishes the winning poems in the undergraduate contest at the University of California; there is nothing displayed except promise, which entitles them to be mentioned here.

ALAN SWALLOW